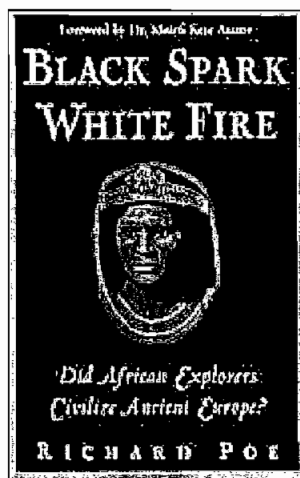


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[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > Did African Explorers Civilize Ancient Europe? An Interview with Richard Poe

## heritage



### Did African Explorers Civilize Ancient Europe? An Interview with Richard Poe

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Ancient Egypt has long held tremendous fascination and symbolism for African Americans as a source of identification and pride. Ancient Egyptian imagery appears in African American popular culture and religion, and narratives of ancient Egyptian grandeur and glory hold a special resonance for many African Americans. On any given day on Harlem's bustling 125th Street, for example, one might encounter a religious group called the Islamic Hebrew Nubians who don "Pharaonic" robes and turbans and preach to pedestrians about the lost tribes of Egypt, while young African Americans shop for clothing at Nefertiti Fashions or marvel at the artifacts displayed in a store called Yaiqab's Treasures of Egypt.

Although many African Americans seem to take Egypt's African heritage for granted, scholars have long debated the origins of ancient Egyptian culture and society. Confronted with the archaeological remains of an obviously impressive and advanced ancient culture in Africa, many 19<sup>th</sup> century European scholars insisted that Egyptian civilization must have originated in Europe or the Near East. This idea has been challenged by many subsequent researchers, perhaps most influentially by Martin Bernal, whose *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol. 1* (Rutgers University Press, 1989) triggered numerous debates. Bernal not only rejected the idea that ancient Egypt was a poor cousin to ancient Greece, as had often been proposed, he argued that in fact, Greek civilization was massively indebted to African and Asian influences, primarily to the Egyptians and Phoenicians. Recently, Bernal's thesis has received strong support from unlikely quarters, from conservative

political commentator Richard Poe.

In *Black Spark, White Fire: Did African Explorers Civilize Ancient Europe?* (Prima Publishing, 1999), Poe, an award-winning author, follows historical and archaeological clues from southern Egypt as far north as ancient Colchis, the modern nation of Georgia. He demonstrates that the ancient Egyptians were a seafaring people, who traveled as far as southern Russia and colonized parts of southern Europe, including Greece. Poe scrutinizes the words of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (450 BC), who observed that the Colchians looked like the Egyptians (he described them as "*melagchroes*," which means "black-skinned," and "*onlotriches*," which means "woolly-haired") and, like them, practiced circumcision. Poe discusses archeological evidence including Colchian linen, which, like Egyptian linen, was woven on "a vertical two-beam loom, whose distinctive pyramid-shaped weights have been found in abundance in Georgian archaeological sites." In light of such evidence, Poe asks, "If the Egyptians would sail 250 miles to buy pine wood in Byblos, and 900 miles to obtain gold, incense, and exotic beads of Ethiopia, why would they not have sailed 560 miles to Greece in whose markets all the riches of Europe could be found? Scholars have never provided a satisfactory answer to this question." Poe draws our attention to astonishing evidence of an Egyptian presence in ancient Greece, including the Pyramid of Amphion. Towards the latter part of his 500-page book, Poe addresses another explosive topic: the race of the ancient Egyptians. "Were the Egyptians black?" Poe asks, echoing a question long debated by scholars. The answer to this question, Poe argues, depends on what standard or definition of blackness is adopted; if the "one-drop rule" commonly used in the US is used, then most Egyptians would have qualified as black, he argues. He states emphatically, however, that the ancient Egyptians were "biologically African," and musters cultural, archaeological, and scientific evidence to demonstrate that the original Egyptians evolved in Africa, not, as had been argued by some scholars, in the Near East or Mediterranean. Poe also highlights Egyptian customs which came from regions further south, including the Egyptian habit of mummifying the dead, ancestor worship, circumcision, and clapping and wearing animal masks during religious rites. "The evidence is strong -- and stronger all the time -- that large portions of Egyptian culture can indeed be traced to the heart of Africa," Poe writes.

Finally, Poe argues that since white Americans often tend to lay claim to ancient Greece, African Americans should have every right to identify with ancient Egypt, offering a powerful rebuttal of conservative and liberal attacks on Afrocentrism. Prof. Molefi Asante of Temple University, one of Afrocentrism's key theorists, has described Poe's book as "Brilliant...a classic volume." I recently spoke to Richard Poe by phone in New York City.

*Black Spark, White Fire is an intriguing, powerfully argued book, but one of the things that made it particularly interesting to me, and which readers may not know, is that you're a self-proclaimed conservative. Is that right?*

I am a conservative. I'm a libertarian -- I believe that government is best which governs least.

*How has Black Spark, White Fire been received by the public in general, and the African American community in particular?*

As Martin Bernal says, there are different phases of reaction to a controversial idea. The first step is: ignore. The major media, the *New York Times Book Review* and other major publications, have ignored the book,

which is noteworthy because I had some glowing academic reviews. The book was warmly received in the black community, for which I am very grateful. However, I envisioned the book for an audience far beyond the black community, reaching a white audience.

The book is designed to convince the most skeptical European-American. As a conservative, I know people who are virulently opposed to these ideas. The book is trying to defuse and disarm the critics but it's not getting mass media publicity. *The main criticism leveled at Bernal's argument, which can also be said of your book, is that you both rely heavily on myth and legend, for example, in your use of Herodotus.*

That is a bogus criticism. Neither Bernal nor I rely on legends. We use legends as a line of inquiry to corroborative evidence. British anthropologist Arthur Evans discovered the Palace of Minos in the same way. He was led in part by the legends and folk beliefs of the Cretan people. Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Troy was guided by Homer.

*Your discussion of the Pyramid of Amphion in Greece is fascinating - why haven't the pyramids of Greece received more attention from Afrocentrists or scholars of other persuasions?*

The Greek archaeologist Theodore Spyropoulos showed us around one pyramid. It occupies a commanding position overlooking the plain of Argos, where many legends took place. On the highway outside Argos, a sign says, "The Pyramid of Elenizo," but no explanation is given. They say it's a mystery who built it. The site itself, unlike others, is overgrown with grass. Spyropoulos thinks the pyramid is being deliberately ignored for political reasons. Greeks don't like the idea of others having built their civilization. There's a "we did everything" attitude, a knee-jerk nationalism, not so much racism.

While excavating in a pyramidal structure near Thebes, Spyropoulos found areas underground, subterranean tunnels and channels, which he felt were tombs. He thought he could find belongings and royal treasures but he was prevented from proceeding. This was the 1970s, a dictatorship was in power, and he was ordered to leave Thebes. Most Afrocentrists are not even aware of the Greek pyramids. I give credit to Bernal who mentions them in *Black Athena II*. There is a book out in Greek called *The Pyramids of Greece*. I haven't read the book, but I'm told it is skeptical and downplays Egyptian influence.

*You say there's a double standard at work when white critics of Afrocentrism say it's wrong for black Americans to identify with ancient Egypt. As you write, "an Anglo-Saxon descended from wild Germanic tribes could legitimately take pride in his cultural inheritance -- however distant and tenuous -- from ancient Greece. But a black African must not take pride in ancient Egypt." Can you elaborate on this point?*

The standard talking point of people who attack Afrocentrism is, "I'm Scottish, I don't claim a Greek civilization." That's a lie. Speaking as a European American myself, the European Americans who say they don't think of themselves as European, as not considering Europe as their heritage, are lying through their teeth. Every white European American has a claim to every European civilization.

In the introduction to *Black Spark, White Fire*, I say I'm proud of European culture. I say that in my opinion, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are the two greatest works of literature. I don't set out to beat up on either of the two cultures [European and African]. Any person who does not have self-

respect, respect for their own heritage, cannot respect others. *You address the question of whether the Egyptians were "black," and you conclude that whether the ancient Egyptians were "black" depends on how you define black. But you make a strong case that the Egyptians were "biologically African."* Can you discuss this distinction?

Africa is a distinct entity. Historically there has been limited access to the continent. People on the African continent are genetically distinct. The fact that people look different -- that there is a gradation in skin color and hair fuzziness the more north you get - is less important than the evidence provided by Shomarka Keita [a bio-anthropologist at Howard University] that Egyptians evolved in Africa, and have more in common with other Africans than with non-Africans from Asia or Europe.

Sickle cell anemia, thought to be limited to Africa, comes up in southern Europe. Cases have come up in Greece and Italy. So are North Africans more like Europeans or are Europeans more like North Africans? Europe was peopled by Africans, who have been seafaring since the Stone Age. So, of course, it all comes down to one's definition of blackness and that's where anti-Afrocentric arguments become problematic.

Loring C. Brace is often cited as someone who's proven that the ancient Egyptians weren't black. He measures skulls and runs craniological evidence through computers, and concludes that sub-Saharan Africans are black, and Egyptians are in a group more similar to Europeans -- but he also considered Nubians and Somalis more like Europeans. And yet the evidence is there to be seen. Many modern Egyptians, many of them descendants of ancient Egyptians, look black. Why measure skulls and use a computer for this conclusion? Ethiopians and Somalis have been described as Caucasoid before; there is a double standard here, too.

Scholars cannot have more than one definition of blackness - the one-drop rule for the US, and for Africa the 19th century standard of the "true Negro" of the original black race with the darkest of complexions and the most Negroid of features. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people in Africa without the most pronounced Negro features were not considered black. The Somalis were considered Hamitic. The differences you see in Africa were not caused by marriage with [non-African] outsiders -- Africans evolved that way. Do Somalis look more European with their features or do Europeans look more like Somalis?

*Would you call yourself an Afrocentrist?*

I'm wary of the phrase "Afrocentrist," just as I'm wary of any political label. I wouldn't call myself an Afrocentrist. I'm not about being Afro-centered. I'm Euro-centered. My book is Eurocentric, it's about the colonization of Europe by Egyptians. Europe is the center of my intellectual world. But my book is sympathetic to Afrocentrism. And again, you don't have to beat up on another culture to be proud of your own. I'm proud to be Russian Jewish and Mexican American, and I have no problem with the idea that Africa colonized much of Europe.

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