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How to Decolonise Art and Science?

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On the African Origins of European Civilisation

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Anita Seppä

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Where the story leads you is a political question.
Taneli Viljanen 2012, 17
History is not past. It is the present.
James Baldwin, documentary movie *I am not Your Negro*, 2017

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Maps drawn on different continents of the earth are interesting evidence of how people tend to imagine their own cultural position as the centre-piece around which everything else revolves. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out in his much-cited book *Provincializing Europe* (2007), similar provincialism is present in our scientific canons and vocabularies. In the centuries that evidenced the birth of the colonialist world power and the closely associated capitalist system, European scholars began to claim that the beliefs and sciences of their home countries were simply more progressive than all others. Therefore, they claimed, it was justified to honour the intellectual and spiritual gifts of white Central European educated men as ideal models throughout the world.¹

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An important factor that Chakrabarty's otherwise excellent analysis leaves out is that, already before the early nineteenth century social evolution studies framed a claim that European-led historical progress was moving progressively towards a destination that could be understood by universally valid reason, a similar idea was articulated by the father of modern art history Johann J Winckelmann in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764). Winckelmann was also among the first to methodically exclude Africa and Asia from the modern histories of the arts. Some

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¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, Kindle Edition, 2000

2 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse, Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, University of Chicago Press, London, Kindle edition, 2021, p 188. See also Zaibab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 2003

3 George W Parker, 'The African Origin of Grecian Civilization', in *Journal of Negro History*, no 2, July 1917, pp 334–344

4 G M James George, *Stolen Legacy: The Egyptian Origins of Western Philosophy* [1954], Wilder Publications, Inc, Kindle edition, 2010

5 Similarly, Molefi Kete Asante (1980) underlines the significant contribution of various African civilisations to the shaping of global history, culture, and knowledge, but reminds us that classical Egypt was not part of the Middle East, but primarily a black African culture. In his study *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980) Asante suggests that Afrocentricity could serve as a transformative framework in the future, centring Africa and its diaspora as important voices in the formation of global narratives. See Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, African American Images, Chicago, Illinois, 2003.

6 I consciously use the expression 'African' here because colonial research has turned it into a pejorative expression. To bring a change, should we not talk about African culture, in the same manner as we talk about European or Western cultures, that are similarly heterogeneous culturally, historically, and geographically? On the black African roots of Egyptian culture, see also J D Irish, 'Who were the ancient Egyptians? Dental affinities among Neolithic through postdynastic peoples', in *American Journal of*

decades later, G W F Hegel, another early practitioner of scientific racism, praised Winckelmann in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835) – which further influenced Karl Marx's ideas on progressive political history – claiming to demonstrate that the history of art had indeed progressed only since ancient Greece, leaving earlier cultures in its shadow as 'prehistorical', and classifying them as primitive and backward. 55

These colonial structures of thought were underpinned by new 'scientific' dichotomies such as 'historical' versus 'prehistoric', 'progressive' versus 'backward', 'civilised' versus 'animal'/'brute', 'cultural' versus 'natural', and 'enlightened' versus 'pagan'. The main aim of these oppositions was to help Europeans form new Western identities in contrast to various barbaric Others, and to exclude them from the train of historical progress.² As a result of this epistemological violence, the pre-colonial cultural heritage of Africa, the Americas, Australia, India, and other parts of the colonised world has been systematically excluded from the 'progressive' history – overlooking the fact that all cultures and societies have histories of their own, even if they are undocumented or do not follow Western historiographical conventions. 60 65

An early example of a decolonial critique of these colonialist views was voiced as early as in 1917 by the American historian and activist George W Parker, who emphasised the importance of African, Asian, and Middle Eastern influences on Greek civilisation. Although Parker did not mention art explicitly, he urged historians to recognise that recent archaeological discoveries have 'unearthed stones which bear sentient testimony to the fact that Africa has been the pioneer in the field of civilisation'.³ A few decades later, George G M James expanded on these ideas in his influential work *The Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (1954), suggesting that ancient Greek sciences and arts were heavily influenced by earlier Egyptian civilisation.⁴ More recently, Martin Bernal (1987) has advocated the concept of the 'Afro-Asian roots' of Greek civilisation as an alternative approach, highlighting the manifold debt of the Greeks to the ancient Middle East, including Egypt.⁵ 70 75 80

With these critical discussions in mind, I invite the reader to join me on a journey to ancient Egypt, whose vast cultural heritage has been almost systematically excluded from modern art history textbooks. The text at hand consists of two partially divergent but also overlapping storylines. 85

The first one is motivated by an intersectional re-reading of established explanations of the Greek roots of European civilisation. After pointing out some essential problems with this metanarrative, I outline a complementary interpretation of the roots of Western civilisation by returning to ancient Egypt and comparing it with the scientific and artistic achievements of the Greeks. This latter report is also based on existing research, but its consolidation has been much slower and more laborious. Because the African roots of Western cultures have been violently wiped out from our canons of science and art, research data must be sought here and there, in fragmented crumbs of knowledge.⁶ 90 95

In the concluding section of this article, I aim to connect decolonising theories with traditional art historical methods. The purpose of this analysis is not to offer a different perspective on 'progress', 'origins', or 'firsts', nor to extend earlier colonially influenced classifications. Instead, it aims to demonstrate how even traditional art historical tools 100

Physical Anthropology vol 129, no 4, 2006, pp 529–543; S R Zakrzewski, 'Population Continuity or Population Change: Formation of the Ancient Egyptian State', in *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* vol 132, no 4, 2007, pp 510–509.

of interpretation critically deconstruct, rather than reinforce, the colonialist narrative of Greek artistic progressiveness. While I agree with trans-cultural theorists such as Fernando Ortiz, Mary Louise Pratt, James Clifford and Achille Mbembe – who argue that when two cultures interact closely, there is mutual creative exchange and transformation – I suggest that archaeological evidence also suggests that Egyptian arts and sciences significantly influenced Greek art and culture, rather than the other way around.

Despite this, the rich cultural history of Egypt, as well as that of several other African civilizations such as Morocco, Mali, Libya, Nubia, and Mauritania, continues to be viewed in the Western bastions of art and science as something that has nothing to do with 'progressive history', and the past and present achievements of the West. These invalid assumptions can only be corrected by exposing the colonialist, racist, nationalist, patriarchal and materialist agendas that have motivated academic scholars to repeat for centuries deluded narratives about the unique development of European science and art, and to dismiss all alternative narratives as barbaric or superstitious. Much in line with these thoughts, Sara Ahmed proposes that to change the current and future power relations we must constantly seek ways to create relationships with others that are less discriminatory, ways that are opposed to 'histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls'.⁷

The Invention of Artistic Progress

As the transatlantic slave trade lived through its boom in the eighteenth century, the colonialist Central Europeans began to develop new racialised theories of art to justify the natural privileges of the white race. Early representatives of this view include German humanist and appointed father of art history Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), whose influential work *The History of Ancient Art* (*Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, 1764) presented a radically new narrative on the Greek origins of high art. This metanarrative that Martin Bernal has called 'the fabrication of ancient Greece between the years 1785 and 1985' was gradually institutionalised as the fundamental scientific base of modern humanities and high arts (*schöne Kunst*), allowing deeply racist provincialist dogmatism to penetrate modern historiography and interpretations of the arts.⁸

In the earlier historical studies, Greek culture had typically been interpreted as the outback of the ancient Levant, that is, culturally and geographically connected regions that are located at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean – today's Israel, Lebanon, Western Jordan, and part of Syria. Before the rise of colonialist history writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was widely thought that the blooming of these earlier high cultures had been achieved with the help of some earlier developed cultures in Africa, Phoenicia, and the Near East.⁹

In his considerations on the historical progress of art Winckelmann came to different conclusions. On the grounds of his subjective analysis of some copies of Hellenistic Greek sculptures that he saw in

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, Kindle edition, 2017, p 1

⁸ See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol I, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985*, Vintage Books, Kindle edition, 1987, for example, pp 163–236

⁹ Ibid

Italy, Winckelmann argued that Greek artworks transcended in their 'noble simplicity and quiet greatness' all earlier artistic achievements, be they Egyptian, Phoenician, Etruscan, or something else. Therefore, he concluded, ancient Greek art was simply more progressive than anything else in human art history and laid an ideal foundation for later European higher arts.¹⁰

Winckelmann's argument marked a significant paradigm shift in the understanding of Greek culture and art. Departing from previous historians, he contended that Greek art did not merely showcase the development of individual artists but represented a much broader historical progression on an abstract timescale.¹¹ In his Aryan history of art, Winckelmann integrated different epochs, nations, races, artistic traditions, and individual characteristics into expressive aesthetic qualities, and re-conceptualised artistic style as a tool for multi-layered collective expression. In this way, artistic expression came to be seen as a collective choral phenomenon, which was no longer influenced by the development of individuals into mature artists, but by the overarching natural laws that governed the historical trajectories of nations, laws that happened to favour white males.¹² Winckelmann was also among the first to make daring statements of the art of distant countries without ever having visited Greece, for example, that is, without seeing with his own eyes any Greek artwork.

These views were later echoed by the philosopher G W F Hegel in his influential essays on aesthetics (1835). Hegel praised Winckelmann for inspiring him to recognise that it was the Hellenistic Greeks who first established superior artistic ideals and set in motion the progress of art history. Building on Winckelmann's ideas, Hegel claimed that the cultural history of Europe overshadowed all immature, fanatical, and unreflective Eastern civilisations, which could therefore not be seen as part of progressive history. In his *Philosophy of History* (1899), he even argued that Africa played no role in world history because of its perceived lack of progress or evolution. From these profoundly racist and scientifically unintelligible assertions Hegel went on to conclude that since black peoples had not yet achieved the realisation of any substantially valid objective existence, such as the notions of law or God, in which man could realise his own being and show interest in advanced principles of existence, their character had 'nothing to do with humanity'.¹³

These imaginative colonialist ideas were justified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the new racial taxonomies of modern European science and the arts. As Immanuel Kant suggested his racist *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1796), it was Mother Nature herself who had arranged the world so that only educated white men possessed the mental capacity to produce sophisticated thought and art. In Kant's view, this naturally privileged elite had a moral duty to educate and uplift those who were born with less. While all individuals were theoretically equal to him as human beings, Kant argued that in practice the principles of freedom could not be extended to people with a complete lack of reason – that is, women, children, non-European people, let alone animals.¹⁴

In this way, the enlightenment philosophers grounded their notion of historical progress on a very peculiar logic, as Chakrabarty comments.

10 Johan Joachim Winckelmann, *Writings on Art* [1755], selected and edited by David Irwin, Phaidon Press, London, 1972

11 Bernard Smith, *The Formalesque: A Guide to Modern Art and its History*, Macmillan, Melbourne, Australia, 2007, pp 39–42

12 See also Michela Passini and Francesco Peri, 'Heinrich Wölfflin and the German Sense of Form', in Kimberly A Smith, ed, *The Expressionist Turn in Art History: A Critical Anthology*, published in the series Studies in Art History, Routledge, New York, 2014, pp 243–247

13 G W F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* [1899], J Sibree, trans, Dover Books Print, New York, 1956, p 93. See also Peter K J Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canons 1780–1820*, SUNY Series, Philosophy and Race, Penn State University Press, 2013, p 150

14 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History and Education* [1796], Günter Zöller and Robert B Loudon, eds, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Kindle edition, 2007, p 15; Park, 'Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy', op cit, pp 93–95

- 15 Chakrabarty, 'Provincializing Europe', op cit, p 4
- 16 See also Chakrabarty, 'Provincializing Europe', op cit, pp 27–28; Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, London, 2012; and Helen Tilley, 'Global Histories, Vernacular Science, and African Genealogies; Or, Is the History of Science Ready for the World?', in JSTOR, *ISIS*, vol 101, no 1, March 2010, pp 110–119
- 17 Thinking about this violence, Ramón Grosfoguel comments that colonial imperialism achieved its world power by using various strategies of genocide. In addition to physical violence, its oppressive apparatus launched a large-scale process of conscious destruction of cultural, juridical, and epistemological annihilation of first nations' own traditions. See Grosfoguel, 'The Structure of Knowledge in Westernised Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides of the Long 16th Century', in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, vol XI, issue 1, Fall 2013.
- 18 Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine and Paola Ivanov, 'Introduction', in *Beyond Compare. Art from Africa in the Bode Museum*, Berlin, Edition Braus Berlin GmbH, 2019, pp 9–11
- 19 Chakrabarty, 'Provincializing Europe', op cit, p 28
- 20 Marilyn Strathern, 'The Ethnographic Effect', in *Property, Substance and Effect*, ed, Marilyn Strathern, Athlone, London, 1999
- 21 See Erich H Cline, *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed*, Princeton University Press, Princeton

On an abstract conceptual level, their thinking included the whole of humanity within the framework of enlightened humanism. At the same time, they used massive amounts of ink to establish new 'scientific' branches of research that categorically denied these lower others all privileges of the humanistic image of man.¹⁵

This deeply contradictory image of humanity was sealed between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries by building European universities in distant colonies. As a result, the provincial chauvinism practiced by colonial countries and racist historians became the basis of academic knowledge, leading to the obligatory inclusion of references to deceased white male figures in the arts and sciences. This phenomenon, which is still very much alive today, mirrored the earlier narrow-minded, religious European interpretations of the Bible, which had also been constructed from the writings of deceased white men.¹⁶

For distant colonies, such provincialist, abstract and all-engulfing conceptions of historical progress were fatal, because they superseded all alternative understandings as backward and pagan.¹⁷ The little that was considered worth preserving in the violently oppressed colonies was either transferred to 'primitive' art museums that were established in the distant mother countries or archived in the windowless cellars of European art museums. Western art scholars were categorically uninterested in presenting talented colonised artists as gifted individuals, as they did with European white male 'geniuses' because, according to modern art theory, non-white masterminds could not even exist.

Undoubtedly partly for this reason, Indigenous artworks are still displayed in Western museums by anonymous artists, as curators Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine and Paola Ivanov noted in their presentation of the *Africa* exhibition at the Bode Museum in Berlin in 2019.¹⁸ Even today, this colonialist epistemology functions as a silent referent in historical knowledge, provoking third-world historians to feel a need to refer to works in European art history, while historians of Europe do not sense any need to respond.¹⁹

To critically rethink the meaning of alternative histories, we need to keep returning to the stories we thought we already knew. As Marilyn Strathern suggests, reviewing what is already thought to be known can also help us find materials we are unaware that we are even looking for.²⁰ With these thoughts in mind, I will next return to the roots of European civilisation history but instead begin my story this time from ancient Egypt. This crucial part of our cultural heritage has been largely white-washed centuries ago from the canon of Western art and science, which is why scholars and artists are no longer familiar with it.

The African Origin of European Higher Education

The cultural rise of ancient Greece from the Dark Ages that followed the sudden disappearance of Mycenaean civilisation (c 1900–1100 BCE) was closely linked to cultural interactions with ancient Egypt. Both archaeological and other evidence from this era points strongly to the influence of African educational traditions on the development of European art and higher education.²¹ A fact that has been mainly wiped out from

and Oxford, Kindle
Edition, 2014, pp 10–11

- 22 See also Ivan Van Sertima, *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*, ed Ivan Van Sertima, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1988, pp 44–45; Ivan Van Sertima *African Presence in Early Europe*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, Oxford 1985; George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit; Théophile Obenga, 'Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy', in K Wiredu, ed, *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts, 2004, pp 165–178
- 23 Kwame Nantambu, 'Freemasonry: Ancient African/Kemet/Egyptian communal way of life and being', 2007, <http://www.trinicenter.com/kwame/2007/0903.htm>, accessed 29 January 2024
- 24 Fabian Welc and Leszek Marks, 'Climate change at the end of the Old Kingdom in Egypt around 4200 BP: New geoarchaeological evidence', in *Quaternary International*, 2014, pp 124–133; Olaf Bubenzer and Heiko Riemer, 'Holocene climatic change and human settlement between the central Sahara and the Nile Valley: Archaeological and geomorphological results', in *Geoarchaeology: An International Journal*, 2007 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/gea.20176>, accessed 15 January 2024
- 25 See Joanne Clarke, Nick Brooks, Edward B Banning, Miryam Bar-Matthews, Stuart Cambell, Lee Clare, Mauro Cremaschi, Savino di Lernia, Nick Drake, Marina Gallinaro, Sturt Manning, Kathleen Nicoll, Graham Philip, Steve Rosen, Ulf-Dietrich Schoop, Mary Anne Tafuri, Bernhard Weninger, Andrea Zerboni, 'Climatic changes and social transformations in the Near East and North Africa

our history lessons is that several of the best-known Greek scientists and philosophers sought their lessons in Egypt, formerly also known as Kemet. After studying for years at the prestigious temple universities of Waset (now known as Thebes) and Ipet Isut (Karnak), as well as Heliopolis and Memphis, they returned home and introduced the rich cultural traditions, sciences, and arts of Africa to Greece, which was culturally behind.²² The ancient Egyptian higher education system was also known in the West by the names of mystery studies and mystery school. For the Egyptians, their own education system was not a mystery, of course. The expression comes from the Greeks' way of talking about Egyptian mysteries that were new and strange to them.²³ Where then, did the exceptionally advanced level of development of the Egyptian culture originate?

Climate change caused by the latest melting phase of the Ice Age, from 10,000 to 7,000 years ago, was a key factor in the exceptional glory of the pharaohs' Egypt. Starting from about 9,500 BCE, the change in the climate brought more rain to the Sahara region and turned the desert into a green and thriving oasis. As monsoonal summer rains regularly watered vegetation and animal kingdoms around 6,000 BCE, more people and animals migrated into the area.²⁴ When the climate begun cooling again, the Saharan lakes dried up. Between approximately 4,200 BCE and 3,200 BCE, climate refugees migrated from the Sahara region to the Nile River Valley due to hyper-aridity. Throughout this era, the river valley saw a more regular pattern of rainfall and flooding, offering improved nourishment for crops and pastures. These favourable conditions led to agricultural prosperity and the flourishing of society, laying the foundation for the advancement of sciences, development of intricate moral systems, and the creation of rich belief systems. These factors played a key role in shaping the extraordinary cultural influence and enduring legacy of Ancient Egypt from around 3,150 BCE until at least the end of the Bronze Age (around 1,200 BCE), when the climate began to change dramatically again – this time in ways that were fateful for Egypt and many other high civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean.²⁵

As Basil Davidson notes, every Greek thinker of the Classical Period sought inspiration and guidance in ancient Egypt and accepted the idea of its cultural superiority.²⁶ Several Greeks also openly acknowledge their debt to Egyptian culture. Among others, Herodotos (c 485–420 BCE), who is called the father of history in the West, noted that Greeks copied directly from Egypt most of their twelve gods, and were educated by the Egyptians who were 'the most learned' people in world history. Herodotos was also amazed by the ability of the Egyptians to memorise vast stores of knowledge by heart and pass these traditions on.²⁷

The mathematician, philosopher, astronomer, and cosmologist Thales (c 636–546 BCE) was among the first Greeks to study the doctrine of the black priests of temple universities. Based on the philosophical and astronomical studies he learned in Africa, Thales 'managed', among other things, to predict eclipses and to demonstrate how sea crossings were measured, when he returned home. He was reportedly also the first Greek to begin teaching Egyptian sciences to his culturally backward countrymen.²⁸

In the fifth century BCE, Thales founded in Ionia a school of rational thinking that was based on his Egyptian education. A young student of

- during the “long” 4th millennium BCE: A comparative study of environmental and archaeological evidence’, in *Quaternary Science Reviews*, vol 136, 15 March 2015, pp 96–121; and Torben et al, ‘Human-environmental interactions’, op cit
- 26 Basil Davidson, *Africa in History*, Themes and Outlines, UK, Phoenix Press, Kindle edition, 2001, pp 151–155. See also Kákosy ‘Plato and Egypt, The Egyptian Tradition’, 1993, p 27, <https://edit.elte.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10831/42541/003.pdf>, accessed 24 October 2023; and Simphiwe Sesanti, ‘Teaching ancient Egyptian philosophy (ethics) and history: Fulfilling a quest for a decolonised and Afrocentric education’, in *Educational Research for Social Change*, vol 7, 2018
- 27 Herodotos, *The Histories*, Book 2: *Euterpe*, Start Publishing LLC, USA, Kindle edition 2015, pp 21–41; and George, ‘Stolen Legacy’, op cit, pp 33–59 and pp 131–132; and Kákosy ‘Plato and Egypt’, op cit, p 26
- 28 William Cook, ‘A Comparative Analysis Between the Nile Valley’s Liberal Arts Tradition and the Development of Western Education’, in *Journal of Black Studies*, SAGE, 2014, p 685; Théophile Obenga, ‘Thales of Miletus and Egypt’, in Molefi K Asante & Ama Mazama, eds, *Egypt vs Greece and the American Academy*, African American Images, Chicago, Illinois, 2002
- 29 George, ‘Stolen Legacy’, op cit; Kákosy, ‘Plato and Egypt’, op cit, pp 25–26
- 30 Charles Finch, ‘Critiquing the Critics: Advancing the Paradigm’, in Asante and Mazama, eds, *Egypt vs Greece*, pp 37–50; John Pappademos, ‘An Outline of Africa’s Role in the History of Physics’, in Ivan Van Sertima, ed, *Blacks in*
- his, Pythagoras, who is called the father of mathematics in the West, went to Egypt for twenty-two years to learn higher mathematics, astronomy, musical harmonies, and esoteric philosophy.²⁹ In 540 BCE, Pythagoras founded his own philosophical-religious school in the town of Croton, located on the southern tip of present-day Italy. The six hundred students of the Brotherhood – which also included women, exceptional for Greece at that time, but customary in Egypt – devoted themselves to mathematical research, sanctification of animals and spiritual development, following the model Pythagoras had adopted in Egypt.³⁰
- As several academic studies show, the spirit of geographical exploration at that time was very much alive, a fact also proven by the circumnavigating of Africa by the Phoenicians at the behest of Pharaoh Neko.³¹ As the Hungarian Egyptologist László Kákosy remarks, the doctors of Egypt ‘had an international reputation’, and the country of the Nile was ‘rightly regarded as a centre of knowledge’.³² There is plenty of evidence to suppose that also Plato (427–347 BCE) was a candidate in the Egyptian temple universities for thirteen years.³³ The similarities between Plato’s idea of another world and Egyptian principles were already noticed in Antiquity.³⁴ Like the ancient Egyptians, Plato also understands art as belonging to the lower phenomenal reality, a mere copy of the higher ideas and forms which dwell in the spiritual realm.³⁵
- As Susan Stephens proposes, Plato’s ideal state, as sketched out in his *Republic*, is clearly inspired by ancient Egyptian democracy. In Stephens’s view, Plato’s political system reworked the ancient principle of *Ma’at* or divine justice, presenting it as a new model for a deeply undemocratic Greek society.³⁶ Agreeing with this view, Kákosy comments that for Plato, who lived in the turbulence of the Greek polis, Egyptian civilisation represented an ideal society with its ‘apparent immobility, its traditionalism and internal stability’.³⁷
- The philosophical imperative ‘man, know thyself!’ which is associated strongly with Socrates’s philosophy, was likewise formulated in the Egyptian philosophy, thousands of years before Socrates was born. The command to know thyself was also carved on the outside walls of Egyptian mystery temples, requiring all those who entered to perceive self-knowledge as the basis of true wisdom.³⁸
- The Egyptian sciences, arts, religious cults, and lifestyles (for example strict vegetarianism, and the legal rights of women) provoked aggressive rejection by the ancient Greeks. Pythagoras’s academy was burned by his countrymen, and its teachers and pupils beaten so many times from 508 BCE on that the school eventually disappeared altogether from Greek territory. For some, the patriotic disapproval of imported cultural materials was even more fatal. Socrates, for example, was sentenced to death by narrow religious fervour in Athens for worshipping ‘foreign gods’, Plato was forced to flee to Megara, and Aristotle was indicted and forced into exile.³⁹
- ## The Egyptian *Artes Liberales*
- The demanding multi-disciplinary higher education of the Egyptian temple universities was divided into three thirteen-and-a-half-year periods. Hence, the full-length studies lasted forty years. The aim of the

Science Ancient and Modern, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1988, pp 44–45

- 31 Anke Graness, 'Writing the History of Philosophy in Africa: Where to Begin?', in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol 28, issue 2, 2016, pp 132–146; Park, 'Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy', pp cit; and Kákosy, 'Plato and Egypt', op cit, p 27
- 32 Kákosy, 'Plato and Egypt', op cit, p 27. See also Ismail Serageldin, 'Ancient Alexandria and the Dawn of Medical Science', in *Global Cardiology, Science and Practice*, vol 2013, no 4, pp 395–404, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24749113/>, accessed 29 January 2024; and Jacques Jouanna & Allie Neil, 'Egyptian Medicine and Greek Medicine', in Philip Van Der Eijk, Brill, ed, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, Leiden & Boston, 2012, pp 3–20
- 33 Plato's student Hermodorus also mentions his travels to Megara, Kyrene, Italy and Egypt. See Kákosy, 'Plato and Egypt', op cit; and George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit
- 34 Kákosy, 'Plato and Egypt', op cit
- 35 See for example George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit, pp 255–256
- 36 Susan Stephens 2016, 'Plato's Egyptian Republic', in *Greco-Egyptian Interactions: Literature, Translation, and Culture*, 500 BCE–AD 300, ed Ian Rutherford, Oxford University Press, pp 41–60. On the concept of Ma'at, see Maulana Rarenaga, Maat, *The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004; and Denise Martin, 'Maat and order in African Cosmology: A Conceptual Tool for Indigenous Understanding Knowledge', in *Journal of*

first stage was to help the candidate to break away from ordinary mortals through demanding rational studies. Next, the student had to develop his or her intellectual vision in a variety of ways. After the successful completion of two first thirteen-and-half year periods, the candidate began her/his journey to become a spiritualised child of light.

In this difficult task, the processing of the individual's inner deity was essential as spiritual enlightenment was believed to free man from the limitations of material reality and from the circle of reincarnation and suffering. The quiet exercise of ten virtues and non-stop meditation strengthened eternal happiness and inner peace. An individual who sought virtue, rational action and peace was also invaluable to society because s/he promoted stability and justice, in which all living beings and all visible and invisible realities had their undeniable value.⁴⁰

The core of Egyptian higher education consisted of seven topics, that were later named *artes liberales* in renaissance Europe, and re-interpreted as a Greek invention. The elemental task of these studies was to strengthen the student's rational and spiritual skills and to make her/him strong in her/his thoughts and actions (know thyself!). In his book *Stolen Legacy* (2016), James George describes the importance of the Egyptian *artes liberales* education system as follows:

Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic were disciplines of moral nature by means of which the irrational tendencies of a human being were purged away, and he was trained to become a living witness of the Divine Logos. Geometry and Arithmetic were sciences of transcendental space and numeration, the comprehension of which provided the key not only to the problems of one's being; but also to those physical ones, which are so baffling today, owing to our use of the inductive methods. Astronomy dealt with the knowledge and distribution of latent forces in man, and the destiny of individuals, places and nations. Music (or Harmony) meant the living practice of philosophy i.e., the adjustment of human life into harmony with God, until the personal soul became identified with God, when it would hear and participate in the music of the spheres.⁴¹

During the first stage of studies – thirteen-and-half years that Plato, for example, is supposed to have spent in Egypt – the candidate learned to master the seven liberal arts and was required to practise the ten virtues around the clock.⁴² When the studies proceeded, it was compulsory to know the 42 *scientific Books of Hermes*, which included two books on music (*The Singer or Odus*), four books on astronomy (*The Horoscopus*), the books on hieroglyphics, cosmography, geography, astronomy, topography of Egypt and Land surveying (*The Hierogrammat*), the books dealing with slaughter of animals and the process of embalming (*The Stolistes*), and ten books that dealt with higher esoteric theology and the whole education of priests (*The Prophets*).⁴³

Six medical books were meant to train students in physiology, anatomy, female and male diseases, drugs, and medical instruments (*The Pastophori*). *The Sciences of Monuments*, ie, pyramids, offered wisdom and skills in the construction of temples, libraries, obelisks, Sphinxes, and idols, and in the practice of masonry, architecture, metallurgy, agriculture, forestry, and mining.

- Black Studies*, vol 38, no 6, July 2008, pp 951–967
- 37 Kákosy, 'Plato and Egypt', op cit, p 26
- 38 George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit, p 1 and p 114
- 39 George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit, p 117
- 40 Yosef A Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family*, Black Classic Press, Baltimore, 1989
- 41 George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit, pp 30–31
- 42 Ben-Jochannan, 'Black Man of the Nile', op cit
- 43 George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit, p 186
- 44 George, 'Stolen Legacy', op cit, pp 185–189
- 45 Ellis Normandi, *Imagining the World into Existence: An Ancient Egyptian Manual of Consciousness*, Bear & Company, Rochester, Vermont and Toronto, Kindle edition, 2012, pp 240–247
- 46 On deep time, see Marcia Bjørnerud, *Timelessness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, Kindle edition, 2020; Robert Schoch, *Forgotten Civilization: New Discoveries on the Solar-Induced Dark Age*, Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont, Kindle edition, 2012; David Darling, *Deep Time: The Journey of a Particle from the Moment of Creation to the Death of the Universe and Beyond*, Delacorte Press, Kindle edition, 2013; and Freddy Silva, *The Missing Lands: Uncovering Earth's Pre-flood Civilization*, Invisible Temple, Kindle edition, 2019
- 47 See, for example, Diana C Patch, 'Dawn of Egyptian Art', Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2022; Gay Robins, *Proportion and Style in Ancient Egyptian Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1994
- For those who were able to further continue their studies, the high priests finalised their education with *The Secret Sciences*, ie, numerical and geometrical symbolism, magic, the Book of the Dead, myths and parables, and also *The Social Order and Its Protection*, which included studies for those who were to become also lawyers, judges, governmental officers, business men, captains and sailors, or masters in economics, civics, law, government, statistics, census taking, navigation, ship building, military science, horse breeding and manufacturers of chariots.⁴⁴
- For the learned Egyptians, the universe revealed its shapes through principles of order, truth, and justice (Ma'at). In the physical world, these shapes became comprehensible through higher mathematics, geometry, and physics. Just as mathematics and other scientific disciplines revealed universal truths and connected the individual to the universe in ancient Egypt, the arts served as a reflective mirror of these truths, offering a creative and expressive interpretation of the holistic scheme that bound together all facets of knowledge and existence.
- The Egyptians believed that when an individual fully understood her/himself, s/he could also understand the celestial symphony of the universe – its intricate laws of astronomy, astrology, proportion, mathematics, geography, medicine, anatomy, rhythm, magic, and art. This interconnected understanding of both the infinite and finite aspects of existence reflected a holistic cosmology in which no aspect of existence stood alone, but was intertwined in a dynamic, interrelated scheme. In this unified worldview, the ancient Egyptians saw all living beings and elements, from the organic to the inorganic, as integral parts of a sacred cosmic tapestry rooted in the very fabric of the universe.⁴⁵
- It is fascinating to observe the parallels between the classical Egyptian holistic worldview and the contemporary scientific exploration of 'deep time' or 'deep history', a concept that not only offers new insights but also reaffirms humanity's ecological interconnectedness within a vast and intricate natural web. This holistic perspective also aligns with the essential principles of New Materialism and the discussions of 'hyperobjects' (Morton), which emphasise the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings and things, both on grand scale and at the smallest levels. Furthermore, when considering the Egyptian holistic cosmology and its relationship with the arts, it is interesting to note how modern science continues to grapple with the challenge of integrating spirituality into its scientific holism – a pursuit that distinguishes it from many other advanced civilisations throughout history.⁴⁶
- In the following section, some archaeological evidence will be critically re-examined to challenge the prevailing notion that the art tradition emanating from ancient Greece is somehow more advanced or progressive than, for example, the earlier Egyptian/African traditions. I highly appreciate all those numerous art historians, who have made significant contributions by analysing visual motifs, geometric patterns, hieratic scales, stylistic parallels, and artistic conventions – such as register and frontalism – in both Egyptian and Greek art.⁴⁷ What I hope to demonstrate instead with the few examples that follow is that a decolonial perspective allows us to also uncover potentially distorted interpretations of art history that may be rooted in ideology rather than archaeological evidence or aesthetic quality. Although my reinterpretation of these classical materials serves as just one modest example within a vast body of

- 48 See also Richard, A Fazzini, James F Romano, and Madelaine E Cody, *Art for Eternity: Masterworks from Ancient Egypt: Brooklyn Museum of Art*, 1999; and Ellis, 'Imagining the World into Existence', op cit; Jean Bigen, *Hellenistic Egypt: Monarchy, Society, Economy, Culture*, University of California Press, 2007; Sally-Ann Ashton 2001; *Ptolemaic Royal Sculpture: The Interaction between Greek and Egyptian Traditions*, BAR International Series #923, British Archaeological Reports, Oxford, 2001; William A P Childs, *Greek Art and Aesthetics in the Fourth Century B.C.*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2018; and Vanessa Davies, and Dimitri Leboury, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Egyptian Epigraphy and Paleography*, Oxford University Press, 2020
- 49 See, for example, Mary L Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London, 2008; James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997; Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California, Berkeley, California, 2001
- 50 See, for example, Sarah P Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995. Several researchers have also contemplated the transnational or Egyptian roots of Greek art, but this trend is not dominant in art history. See Jeremy Tanner, 'Finding the Egyptian in Early Greek Art', in Roger Matthews and Cornelia Roemer, eds, *Ancient Perspective on Egypt*, UCL Press, London, 2003; and Emilie Charron, 'Archaic Greek Sculpture and Its Foreign Influences',

archaeological studies in this field, I hope that the comparison will offer some valid ideas for critically examining the 'Greek story' and opening up new pathways for its retelling.

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Entangled Egyptian and Greek Arts

It is widely acknowledged that Egyptian and Greek cultures had close contact from at least 600 BCE. The Greeks established a colony in the city of Naucratis during this time, and the first kouros and kore sculptures were created. In the Archaic period (c 600–480 BCE), the Greeks' access to study in Egypt provided them with new skills and aesthetics from the Egyptians. After conquering Egypt in 332 BCE, they gained even better access to Egyptian artistic techniques, symbolism, and ideals. This trans-cultural period is closely linked to the rise of the so called Hellenistic artistic period (323–30 BCE), which Winckelmann identifies as the origin of the world's progressive art history.

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During the Hellenistic period Greek artists adopted a wide range of earlier Egyptian styles and themes, incorporating them into their own interpretation of realism. Greek sculptors were particularly attracted to the stylised and elongated forms characteristic of Egyptian art, as well as the meticulous attention to detail in their work. This cultural exchange and fusion led to a distinct blending of artistic elements from both civilisations. This intertwined cultural exchange led to a unique fusion in ancient Greek art, where a preference for a more grounded realism often prevailed over the classical Egyptian aesthetic, which emphasised detailed realism alongside the eternal spiritual and ethical growth of humanity.

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Some scholars suggest that Greek influence was also present in Egyptian art during the Hellenistic period, a time when Egypt was under Greek rule. It has been observed that the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt (305–30 BC), who were of Greek descent, commissioned works that blended Greek and Egyptian artistic traditions.⁴⁸ These theories of transculturation emphasise the mutual creative exchange and transformation of cultures in contact, rather than hierarchical models of influence.⁴⁹ However, it is important to recognise that the integration of Greek elements never displaced the essential elements of the Egyptian artistic traditions and styles, but rather coexisted with them during the Hellenistic period. Moreover, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the influence of the Greeks on Egyptian art was not as transformative as the other way around.

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On closer examination, it becomes clear that the dismissive criticisms of Egyptian art made by Winckelmann and his followers – such as the notion that it is characterised by a two-dimensional and schematic representation – may be more applicable to Archaic Greek art than to the contemporaneous Egyptian art of the period. A particular example to illustrate this point is the famous Greek sculpture of the Kore, the *Lady of Auxerre*, created between 640 and 620 BCE. Regarded as a pivotal archaeological find in the annals of art history, this sculpture is still often hailed as a remarkable early achievement in Greek stone carving, with some even considering it a turning point in the evolution of artistic expression.⁵⁰

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Research Gate, Nov.
2016. [https://www.
researchgate.net/
publication/324379920_
Archaic_Greek_Sculpture_
and_Its_Foreign_
Influences](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324379920_Archaic_Greek_Sculpture_and_Its_Foreign_Influences), accessed 26
January 2024.

The fallacy of this canonised interpretation can be easily realised by 520
comparing the Greek Kore statue with the Egyptian silver sculpture of
the same era. Its African artist has been able to create both a technically
and aesthetically demanding work of art. The figurine simultaneously
follows certain representative canons of Egyptian female goddesses, and
expresses, with startling eloquence and subtle expression, the sensual 525
and anatomical peculiarities of a naked upper-class woman, especially
in the areas of the face, fingers, toes, and abdomen. The sophisticated
spirituality presented by the statuette is both delicately intellectual and
erotic. Similar features are very difficult to find in the famous Greek
Kore sculptures of the same era, whose technical and artistic finishing is 530
even disturbingly clumsy, and whose forms are schematic and one-dimen-
sional, unlike its Egyptian counterparts.

In the light of existing archaeological evidence, it seems appropriate to
suggest that Greeks copied directly from Egypt not only the idea of
making tomb-ware such as the Kore sculptures, but also the use 535
of marble and other hard sculpture materials, the frontal presentation
of the figure, the position of the hands, the look and essence of the face
(expressing the internal peace and spiritual balance that the Egyptians
highly appreciated), the narrow pelvis and the detailed decoration of
the area around the head, and so on. The practice of drawing a grid on 540
the surface of the material before starting to sculpt – which made it
easier to master the form and harmonious unity of the work – also
migrated from Egypt to Greece.⁵¹

As the numerous sophisticated metal, glass and gemstone works also
indicate, the Egyptians must already have had a very long history of 545
exceptionally sophisticated art behind them at the time when they were
producing works like these. At that time, the Greek art was still
waiting to be born – the first Greek period in art is thought to have
begun only around 900–650 BCE, consisting mainly of simple painted
pottery that cannot be described as progressive or advanced in any 550
way. In Egypt, the detailed and realistic scarab figure was associated
with fertility, protection, rebirth, and spiritual symbolism. They were
decorated with intricate carvings and inscriptions and were either worn
as jewellery or used in funerary rituals. It is very difficult to find anything
similar in Greece at that time.

The Greeks only produced their first stone buildings and sculptures 555
starting in 700–600 BCE, by which time the Egyptians had already con-
structed extraordinary temples, pyramids, pillars, and sculptures of stone
for thousands of years. Similarly, while the Greeks were learning to
present details of anatomy and drapery and imbue their mythical
figures with expressiveness, the Egyptians had already mastered these 560
techniques long ago. While Egyptian sculpture captures a sense of medi-
tative spirituality and cosmic harmony through the pharaoh and his
wife's tranquil poses and symbolic drapery that connects them with the
celestial realm, the Hellenistic Greek terracotta female statue portrays,
through its elegant posture and intricate clothing details, a more earthly 565
realism that lacks the profound intellectual and spiritual depth seen in
the Egyptian artwork.

Another example of the cultivated nature of Egyptian art is a
stone sculpture masterpiece (c 1839–1792 BCE) depicting Pharaoh
Amenemhat III. The intricately detailed artwork is sculpted with 570

51 See also John G. Pedley,
*Greek Art and
Archaeology*, University of
Michigan, 2002, p 148; and
Andrew F. Stewart, *Greek
Sculpture*, Yale University
Press, New Haven, 1990



Colour Both In Print And Online

Lady from Auxerre, c 640–620 BCE, Greece, limestone, H: 64 cm, storage site: Louvre, photo: Jastrow, Wikimedia Commons

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Silver sculpture of the late Saite Period, c 610–595 BCE, Egypt, the naked upper-class female figure is equipped with Pharaoh's Cartus and groove, H: 23.8 cm, weight 1.13 kg, storage site: Metropolitan Museum of Arts

advanced techniques and nuanced expressions in grey sandstone, an exceptionally hard material consisting of a mixture of impure sandstone with poorly organised sharp grains of quartz, feldspar, and small rock lithic fragments set in a dense fine clay and mud-covered base. The Pharaoh's face is subtly expressive, exuding a calm and captivating demeanour that conveys to the viewer the king's dual nature as both sensual and divine. Some 1300 years before the Greeks made their first stone sculptures, such as *The Lady of Auxerre* (640–620 BCE), the African artist has portrayed the silky smoothness of Amenemhat's skin and gentle contours of his face with remarkable craftsmanship and eloquence. Atop his head, Amenemhat III bears the emblem of Upper Egypt – a white



Amethyst scarab, Middle Kingdom, Egypt, c 2033–1710 BCE, stored in Louvre, photo: Anita Seppä

crown with a polished surface. In the light of archaeological evidence such as this remarkable artwork, it is clear that the perceived hierarchical superiority between classical African/Egyptian civilisations and later Western civilisations warrants a thorough reassessment.

For centuries, the Greeks drew inspiration from the Egyptian sciences, art and architecture, yet they did not fully embrace the holistic system of knowledge and spiritual depth present in Egyptian art. Classical African/Egyptian holistic sciences aimed to connect with deep time and history, and promote holistic wisdom, social justice, inner balance, and order amidst cosmic chaos, all of which were also sought through art. This significant cultural divergence may shed light on why many Western art scholars tend to prioritise the materialistic, realistic, and emotional aspects of classical art, often labelling these traits as 'progressive' and 'advanced' in an historical context.

How can we reframe the narrative of Greek origins in a scientifically credible manner that aligns with contemporary ecological observations? There is a pressing need for a systematic intersectional deconstruction of art and cultural history from a decolonising perspective. These critical analyses should prompt to acknowledge how historical violence continues to shape the present and how racist colonial narratives have erected barriers and hierarchies in academia that we must navigate



Statue of Horemheb and Amenia, c 1300 BCE, limestone, H: 130 cm, storage: British Museum, photo: Yair Haklai, Wikimedia Commons

Colour Both In Print And Online



Terracotta statuette of a draped woman, traces of paint, c 300 BCE (Hellenistic), 21.5 x 9.4 x 5.6 cm, storage: The Walters Museum, photo: online commons

Colour Both In Print And Online



Statue of Amenemhat III, broken from a (lost) statue, Egypt, Middle Kingdom, 12 dynasty, c 1839–1792 BCE, H: 46 cm, stored in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek AEIN, Copenhagen, photo: Gunnar Bach Pedersen, Wikimedia Commons

- before deconstruction or reconstruction can occur. To create more inclusive and decolonised knowledge archives, it is essential to reassess archaeological evidence with fresh perspectives. This entails integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, cosmologies, and arts into Western interpretations of world art, forming collaborations with artists and scholars from marginalised communities, and embracing community-based practices.
- Scholars are also increasingly recognising the impact of the environmental on the history of art, and the role of ecological systems in shaping the rise and fall of civilisations. By delving into the past, we can better understand and anticipate the widespread and long-lasting impacts of climate change on cultures and the uncertainties we face today. Also in this regard, the history of Egypt offers intriguing insights and perspectives that will be further explored in the following section.
- ## Changing Climate and the End of the Bronze Age
- To fully comprehend the multifaceted connections between classical and modern times, it is essential to consider that changes in climate have also frequently caused the migration of high cultures from one location to another, often leading to the ascent of one and the simultaneous decline of the another. This was also the case in classical Egypt and Greece. Contemporary scientists have gathered evidence that the fall of the Egyptian superpower was primarily the result of a climate change that began at the end of the Bronze Age (c 1200–1100 BCE) accelerating the decline of several advanced civilisations throughout the eastern Mediterranean region.⁵²
- As Eric Cline reports in his book *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed* (2015) the sudden freezing of the climate around 1250 BCE lasted up to three hundred years and caused harsh food shortages, death and famine in large areas. Seismic storms and fierce earthquakes followed each other, political life reached crisis points, and aggressive troops invaded from one country to another, seeking new viable conditions for living.⁵³ The cradle of the civilisation of mankind was plunged, at the end of the Bronze Age, into a state of catastrophic turmoil in less than one hundred years, specifically in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Eastern Africa. The disruption of established trade routes and agricultural systems due to climate fluctuations further exacerbated regional instability, triggering conflicts and invasions as populations competed for limited resources and sought out viable living conditions.
- Egyptian civilisation began to deteriorate at the end of the new kingdom (1550–1069 BCE), when the mythical Sea People and other warrior tribes carried out devastating raids in the Eastern Mediterranean, repeatedly also invading Egypt between 1220 and 1180 BCE, weakening the kingdom to a shadow of its former glory.⁵⁴ Numerous Eastern Mediterranean cultures and cities, including the fabled city of Troy, were either destroyed in an instant when natural disasters and aggressive invaders took turns striking them or regressed into centuries long 'Greek Dark Ages'.⁵⁵ The Hittite empire collapsed in 1180 BCE, and Canaan, Cyprus, several Phoenician cities, Mycenaean Greece were rapidly destroyed. The demolition was so thorough that widespread literacy disappeared for centuries.
- 52 Wild et al, '14 C-dating of the Late Bronze Age', op cit
- 53 See Kaniewski, 'Environmental Roots of the Late Bronze Age Crisis', in *Plos One*, August 2013, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0071004>, accessed 29 November, 2022. On the sharp increase in Northern Hemisphere temperatures immediately before the collapse of Mycenaean centres, which was followed by rapid cooling see Brandon L Drake 'The Influence of Climatic Change on the Late Bronze Age Collapse and the Greek Dark Ages', in *Journal of Archaeological Science*, vol 39, issue 6, June 2012, pages 1862–1870, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305440312000416>, accessed 18 January 2024. Similarly, Israel Finkelstein, Defna Langgut, and Thomas Litt have noted that fossil pollen particles drilled through sediments indicate severe droughts beginning c 1250 BCE in the southern Levant. See their article 'Climate and the Late Bronze Collapse: New Evidence from the Southern Levant', in *Tel Aviv*, vol 40, no 2, 2013, pp 149–175, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/033443513X13753505864205>, accessed September 2023
- 54 Cline '1177 B.C.', op cit, pp 10–11. See also Eva Maria Wild, Peter M Fisher, Peter Steier and Teresa Bürge, '14 C-Dating of the Late Bronze Age City of Hala Sultan Tekke, Cyprus: Status Report', in *Research Gate*, July 2019, pp 1–12
- 55 Drake 'The Influence of Climatic Change', op cit. See also Torben et al, 'A Human-environmental interactions', op cit

- 56 Rick Torben, Miguel A C Ontiveros, Antonieta Jerardino, Annarita Mariotti, César Méndez, Alan N Williams, 'A Human-environmental Interactions in Mediterranean Climate Regions from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene', in *Anthropocene*, vol 31, September 2020; A M Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece: An Archaeological Survey of the Eleventh to the Eighth Centuries BC* [1971], Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrpnz>, accessed 30 January 2024; and John L Bintliff, 'The Origins and Nature of the Greek City-state and its Significance for World Settlement History', in Pascal Ruby, ed, *Les Princes de la Protohistoire et l'Emergence de l'Etat*, Ecole Française de Rome, Rome, 1999, pp 43–56, <https://books.openedition.org/pejib/287>, accessed 31 January 2024
- 57 Cline, '1177 B.C.', op cit. See also Joseph G Manning, Francis Ludlow, Alexander R Stine, William R Boost, Michael Sigl and Jennifer R Marlon, 'Volcanic Suppression of Nile Summer Flooding Triggers Revolt and Constrains Interstate Conflict in Ancient Egypt', in *Nature Communications*, vol 8, 2017; and Dadna Langgut, Israel Finkelstein, and Thomas Litt, 'Climate and the Late Bronze Collapse: New Evidence from the Southern Levant', in *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University*, vol 40, issue 2, 2013, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/033443513X13753505864205>, accessed 18 January 2024
- 58 Torben et al, 'A Human-environmental Interactions', op cit
- 59 Drake, 'The influence of climatic change', op cit

turies in the Aegean region. The transition continued until the rise of the Greek *poleis* around the eighth century BCE, which ushered in a new organisational structure known as the city-state system.⁵⁶

Egypt endured the storm better than many other countries, but its status as a superior civilisation was permanently weakened, facilitating the arrival of later invaders.⁵⁷ The millennia-old splendour of the Egyptian Empire begun to wane in the sixth century BCE due to a series of imperialist conquests that began in 671 BCE when the Assyrians invaded fragile Egypt. Their over 100 years reign was followed by Persian rule from 525–404 BCE, Greek conquest 332 BCE, the Roman annexation in 30 BCE, Persians reconquest from 619–629 BCE, the Arab Muslim conquest in 639 AD, and finally the European colonial rule.

Climate researchers now refer to the late sixth and seventh centuries AD as the Late Antique Little Ice Age. During this period, environmental changes posed significant challenges to Greek societies. While the impact of this climate change was less severe than the events that marked the end of the Bronze Age and the Egyptian Empire, the harsh environmental conditions resulting from a volcanic events led to widespread famines, pandemics, ruralisation and a decrease in agricultural surpluses and trade commodities.⁵⁸

Even today, cultural history and art textbooks almost categorically ignore the fact that around 350 BCE, at the dawn of the Hellenistic period whose artistic achievements Winckelmann and his followers greatly admire, the cultures of the Mediterranean and Europe were again affected by climate change, this time favouring the Greek and Roman regions. This 'Roman Warm Period', which refers to a period of increased temperatures and favourable climatic conditions, undoubtedly helped the Greeks and Romans to become the new lords of the Mediterranean.⁵⁹ In these regions, wheat, wine, and oil became crucial to human population growth as the ideal climate conditions shifted from Egypt to Greece and Rome. Increased agricultural production, urbanisation, the development of new needs and social hierarchies, intensified industrial activities such as mining and metallurgy, and greater cultural and economic links between Mediterranean societies further increased the pressure on natural resources. This stress manifested through deforestation, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and increased pollution.⁶⁰ These activities also altered landscapes, ecosystems, and the availability of resources, particularly in Rome, which at its peak had a population of around 75 million.⁶¹

As the Roman Empire intensified, early Italian humanists such as Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Pliny the Younger (61–112 CE) began to develop new cultural histories that replaced previous Greek and African emphasis. In this new imaginative report, the people of Africa, Spain and Gaul were in turn made to embody the notion of savages and barbarians, while the Romans represented themselves as leaders of the highest civilisation and progress.⁶²

The final death blow to Egyptian high culture were the edicts of the last Emperor of the Roman Empire Theodosius I (347–395 BCE) and Justinian (483–565 BCE), who followed him a hundred years later. These Roman leaders denounced all non-Christian cultures as pagan and dangerous. The vast knowledge archives of Egyptian mystery schools were proclaimed throughout Christendom as heresy.⁶³ These violent

- 60 Noemí Silva-Sanchez and Xose-Lois Armada, 'Environmental Impact of Roman Mining and Metallurgy and Its Correlation with the Archaeological Evidence: A European Perspective', 2002, *Environmental Archaeology: The Journal of Human Palaeoecology*, published online 7 March 2023; and Tyler V Franconi 2021, 'The Environmental Imperialism of the Roman Empire in Northwestern Europe', in Paul Erdkamp, Joseph G Manning, Koenraad Verboven, eds, *Climate Change and Ancient Societies in Europe and the Near East*, Palgrave Studies in Ancient Economies, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81103-7_11

- 61 Historian Kyle Harper has estimated that Rome's population peaked at around 75 million. See Kyle Harper 2017, *The Fate of Rome*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 30-31.

- 62 See Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p 68; and Zvi Yavetz, *Plebs and Princes*, Routledge, New Brunswick, 1998, p 102

- 63 Cline, '1177 B.C.', op cit, p 692

- 64 Alan Cameron, 'The Last Days of the Academy at Athens', in *Proceedings in the Cambridge Philological Society, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, New Series, no 15, 1969, pp 7-29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44696832>, accessed 30 January 2024

- 65 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, Atheneum, New York, 1958, p 299

reformations also led to the demolition of the Greek academies that were built on Egyptian mystery doctrines. Plato's Academy in Athens was closed in 529 BCE,⁶⁴ and Egypt's enormous importance to later European science, arts, theology, and democracies was largely forgotten. 990

Epilogue

The colonialist metanarrative of the Greek origins of Western civilisation might be described today as an eccentric mixture of central European fantasy fiction, provincialist and racist mythology, and utopian social thought. Reflecting on such selective recordings of the past, French anthropologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss comments that the primary task of literary communication – to which we can without hesitation read the canonised narratives of art history – is to make slavery possible.⁶⁵ The violent roots of colonial knowledge systems can also be associated with wider state apparatus – or, as Ann Stoler suggests, the knowledge technologies that produce the existence of modern states.⁶⁶ 995

In the light of these critical observations, it seems clear that the essential task of actual critical art research is to dismantle these enslaving power-structures by constantly seeking out what has not been written and why, and what has actively been forgotten.⁶⁷ It is evident that we cannot change art history, or any other cultural readings of history (at least into a fairer or more harmonious place) if we are not prepared to constantly learn new things ourselves. We also get our future from various significant others that we may not even be able to know or perceive – other peoples, histories and cultures, subsequent generations, and partner species; ecological and cosmic sequences of events that we find impossible to control, and from resourceful artists whose works surprise us. 1000

In a decolonising framework, increasing our own understanding is clearly not enough, however. As Linda Tuhiwai-Smith expresses, we also need to support colonised people to mend their living circumstances, because even though new storylines might ease them, they surely do not prevent people from suffering and dying. Moreover, we are currently experiencing rapid climate change and the sixth wave of extinction, which are at least partly rooted in the distorted relationship with nature established by colonial conquerors, and can still be seen in the endless desire to practice massive intrusions on Indigenous lands worldwide.⁶⁸ This sense of reality is a huge challenge to current humanistic sciences and interpretations of art, and it also encourages us to seek better understanding of the serious loss of intellectual and cultural capacity that has been caused by colonialism. 1005

Seen from this perspective, research is no harmless or detached academic exercise, but an activity that 'has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions', as Tuhiwai-Smith emphasises. It might feel harsh to start the paradigmatic conversion towards decolonised thinking and art, but if we do not wish to continue operating with dead academic principles, there actually are no alternatives than to start digging. Perhaps the poet Audre Lorde (1934-1992), a black lesbian feminist scholar and activist, had something similar in 1010

66 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, Kindle edition, 2009, loc 701

67 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books, 1963

68 Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, 'Decolonizing Methodologies', op cit. See also Ghosh, 'The Nutmeg's Curse', op cit

69 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* [1984], New York, Ten Speed Press, Kindle edition, 2007, pp 105–106

70 Eeva-Liisa Manner, *Tämä matka*, Herbert Lomas, trans, Tammi Publications, 1956, <https://www.booksfromfinland.fi/1995/09/this-journey/>, accessed 31 January 2024

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mind when she suggested that the only way to get rid of the Master's house is to step out of it.⁶⁹

Amid ongoing climate change, this exterior may seem more and more difficult to see. All alternative life forms and living environments appear rather to be speeding in a in fast-paced boat towards a shared uncertain future. Perhaps poetry and art will eventually reach better than academic theory echoes of those broader realities whose energy storms will eventually determine the future of the human species. So let us leave the last words to the Finnish poet Eeva-Liisa Manner.

Spinoza

I ground lenses, so they could see.
All night I polished the glass camber,
offering to God
grindings of the mind.

Silence. And I saw:
they all refracted wrong.

So am I sufficient now? –
a bringer of pain, loneliness
and no
written ignorance?

Eeva-Liisa Manner (1956), trans,
Hebert Lomas.⁷⁰

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