REVIEWS: MANFRED BIETAK

BY

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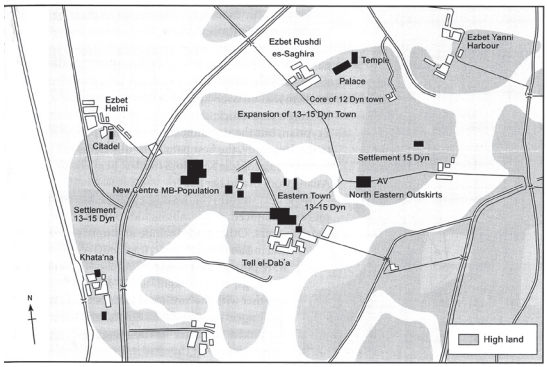
> *"By main force they easily seized it without striking a blow; and having overpowered the rulers of the land, they then burned our cities ruthlessly, razed to the ground the temples of gods...Finally, they appointed as king one of their number whose name was Salitis."*

So Josephus, who claims to quote from Manetho's now-lost history, describes the Hyksos occupation of Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (1600 to 1400 B.C.). Thrown into chaos, Egypt became a land of turmoil as the native pharaohs retreated to southern Thebes, attempting to expel the Hyksos from their new capital in the north—Avaris.

For years, archeologists had only circumstantial evidence to indicate even the existence of Avaris. For example, the pharaoh Seqenenre II received mortal wounds on a battlefield in the Avaris area. His remains show a puncture through the left cheekbone and a mutilated right eye, wounds likely sustained in the war against the Hyksos. His son, Kahmose, died only a few years later, presumably from battle wounds. Kahmose was then succeeded by his younger brother, Ahmose, who finally succeeded in expelling the Hyksos. Egypt was once again reunited and the Eighteenth Dynasty firmly established. But who were the Hyksos? Were they the Hurrians, a non-Semitic people originating from Syria? Or were they Amorites, as the western Semitic origin of their names might suggest? In attempts to understand the enigmatic

invaders, Egyptologists have been stymied by a lack of evidence, even for their existence. Thus began the quest to find the ancient capital of Avaris, to prove once and for all who the Hyksos were.

Manfred Bietak, Professor of Egyptology at the University of Vienna, has been foremost in that quest. By invitation of Karen Foster, a professor here at Yale, Bietak delivered a scintillating presentation on April 1st, 2004, discussing his most recent work in Egypt. Bietak packed a lecture room in Linsley-Chittendon Hall, drawing students and professors from disciplines as diverse as Physics, Classics, and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.



Plan of Tell el Dab'a
Picture by Janine Bourriau

Amazingly, in 1966, Bietak discovered Avaris in a field near Tell el-Dab'a, a village in the eastern delta of northern Egypt. It seemed that a huge part of the Egyptian mystery could soon be solved, and the identity of the Hyksos might actually be revealed. Soon, however, excavators realized that the sheer size of the site made any immediate answers impossible. Covering over 250 hectares, Avaris is vast. Bietak matter-of-factly states, "[One] cannot excavate such a huge site even in 1,000 years." Since excavation entails the destruction of the site's archaeological context, it is paramount that excavators proceed with exacting detail, or valuable information will be lost. Necessarily, this painstaking process takes time, and, thus, the excavations at ancient Avaris have yielded only a slow but steady flow of information since the site's discovery.

So far, Bietak has uncovered the gardens, a but-

tressed enclosure wall, a tower, evidence of a sacrificial ritual, the grave pits of soldiers, and one of the most sophisticated water supply systems of the ancient world. Additionally, he has discovered pavement constructed from mud bricks, which still retain hoof prints and even the imprint of a bricklayer's hand.

Bietak described working in some of the most difficult conditions in Egypt. The extraction of the mud bricks, in particular, was extremely challenging. Since the entire delta region is filled with mud, excavators can only recognize a brick by "feeling out" the consistency of the mud with their hands. Unfortunately, the waterlogged environment destroys most organic materials, including papyri.

However, Bietak's persistence has paid off. In the 1990's, his team started unearthing unusual artifacts—or rather, artifacts unusual to Egypt. In the midst of two Eighteenth Dynasty palaces from the time of Ahmose, strange fresco debris began appearing, especially along a ramp leading from the smaller palace, Ezbet Helmi. Bietak conjectures that the plaster was once mounted on the walls, which shrank after 10 to 15 years, causing the paintings to fall shortly thereafter. As the paintings chipped off the walls, it seems that whoever was in residence simply tossed the debris over the side of the ramp, where "happily, we found them!" Bietak set his team to reconstructing these chips in order to unveil the original composition, coming to the remarkable conclusion that the paintings are *not Egyptian*.

In the dead capital of a nation then ravaged by wars with the Hyksos, Kushites, and Nubians, Bietak has found evidence that yet another people were active—the Minoans of Crete.

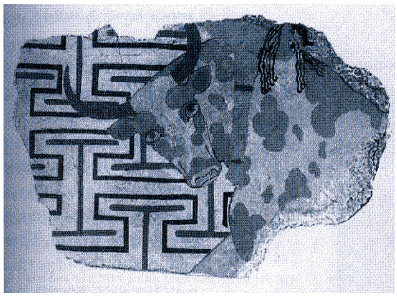
The paintings all display distinctive Minoan artistic techniques and motifs found only in the palace at Knossos and on the periphery of Minoan civilization, such as the Greek islands of Thera and Kea. Some of the frescoes were made by mixing shell into the plaster, but the Egyptians did not use this technique. Many contain loop

petals, ivy petals, running spiral designs, and triangular red patterns—all signatures of Minoan art. The floors of Ezbet Helmi are painted in a maze motif similar to Knossian art. Knossos, of course, was the legendary home of King Minos and the Minotaur—and the original labyrinth. In some paintings, the landscape is inverted; some of the ground even appears along the top border of the composition. Rather than representing a 'cave', this is instead a distinctly Minoan convention to represent distant landscape. These paintings also include stone imitations with veins drawn into them, just like those in the throne room of Knossos.

The subject matter of the paintings themselves is typically Minoan. There are numerous scenes of animals hunting, with more than ten lions romping over bushes, six leopards engaged in various acts of stalking and pouncing, and two lions bringing down a bull. One painting illustrates the ankles of a woman wearing a Minoan flounced skirt. Bietak has even found emblems of Minoan royalty, including several griffins and half-rosettes. Perhaps the most distinctive markers of the Minoan style are bull leaping scenes. Bull leaping, itself, was an ancient art practiced only by the Minoans, and which is still not fully understood. (Strangely, few scientists are dedicated enough to experiment!) In the standard bull leaping scene, one 'leaper' is usually engaged in somersaulting over the bull (if he is successful), or in being trampled (if he is unsuccessful). If the leaper is successful, both his arms are shown in front of the bull. From what little we know about the sport, this is the safest way to leap a bull. Another person is usually situated near the bull's head, sometimes with arms locked about its horns, so that it cannot gore the leaper in mid-air. A third person stands near the rear of the bull, probably to help launch the 'leaper;' he, therefore, is referred to as the 'thrower'.

In Minoan art, there appear to be regular color conventions, with which the paintings of Avaris are entirely consistent. Typically, the leaper is red while the other two are yellow. It makes sense that the two people

on the ground should wear lighter colors to attract less notice from the bull, while the leaper should wear darker colors to keep its attention. Even the bulls in the Avaris paintings are subjected to the usual conventions of Minoan art; their black eyes are lined in red, further outside with blue, then yellow.



Minoan fresco from Tell el-Dab'a
Photo by Janine Bourriau

Such attention to the details of bull leaping scenes suggests that the artwork at Avaris is not just a mere Egyptian imitation, but rather that there was direct contact between the Minoans and Egyptians. While the quality of the art varies, the rendering of the bull's eyes is so exact, it seems that Minoan artists themselves, long familiar with painting bulls, must have produced it. This theory is further supported by the complete lack of Egyptian emblems and the universal neglect of the typical Egyptian color, green, in favor of the Minoan blue.

Because it is prominently located in such a large city, this art may indicate direct trade connections between the two civilizations. Bietak has suggested that after the expulsion of the Hyksos invaders, Ahmose and successive rulers of the Eighteenth Dynasty made deliberate efforts to forge a relationship with other sea-faring powers in order to prevent another such crisis. One such power was Minoan Crete, and the employment of Minoan royal emblems at the palace of Ezbet Helmi has led Bietak to propose that the nature of this relationship was a dynastic marriage to one of the Minoan royalty.

Whether there was, indeed, a royal wife in residence at Ezbet Helmi may never be known. It is certain, however, an astonishing relationship existed between ancient Egypt and Minoan Crete, and Bietak is instrumental in its discovery. In the meantime, excavation at Tell el-Dab'a is sure to continue—at least for another 1,000 years.

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