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THE EARLY BRONZE AGE III TEMPLE AT TELL IBRAHIM AWAD AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE EGYPTIAN OLD KINGDOM

*Manfred Bietak*¹

Abstract

The series of temples of **Tell Ibrahim Awad** in the Eastern Nile Delta shows features that are not found in Egyptian contemporary temples from the late Prehistory to the high Old Kingdom. They range, however, by their plan and their orientation perfectly within the patterns of temples of the Early Bronze Age in Canaan. This phenomenon could be explained by the proximity of the site to the north-eastern border of Egypt towards the neighboring cultural province of the Early Bronze Age in Canaan. Another explanation, however, offers itself.

People of the Ancient Near East were employed in Egypt during the Old Kingdom and possibly even earlier as soldiers, shipbuilders and sailors. The proximity of the site to ancient Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a) and Pi-Ramesse, which were important harbor towns with a large amount of inhabitants of Near Eastern origin, and the physiography of the river Nile in antiquity limiting harbors of seagoing ships to be only in relatively short distance to the sea raise the suspicion that also **Tell Ibrahim Awad was a harbor town in the Old Kingdom** with a community coming from the Levant. Further excavations at this site could be considered as very important for an understanding of foreign relations of Egypt in the Old Kingdom.

At Tell Ibrahim Awad, in the Eastern Nile Delta a Dutch expedition found in direct vicinity of an early Middle Kingdom Temple² a series of temples, which go back from the Old Kingdom to the final phase of prehistory (Fig. 1).³ The temples from the time of the Old Kingdom (phases 2b and 2c) were classified in Egyptology as so-called Preformative Temples and seen principally as Egyptian constructions.⁴ The pre- and protodynastic temples are only preserved in their foundations without showing other architectural details except elongated rectangular forms. Also, the temples of the Old Kingdom dating approximately to the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties show elongated rectangular forms, oriented north-south

with the entrance front towards the east (Fig. 2). Nobody noticed that temples of the same period common in Canaan and the Near East in general in the Early Bronze Age Period show by form and orientation a high similarity to the temples at Tell Ibrahim Awad.⁵ The prevailing type of sanctuary in all the regions of the Near East including Canaan was the so-called 'broad room temple' where a long rectangular building is facing east (Fig. 3). The entrance is in the middle of the eastern long wall of the building and leads to the cult podium at the midst of the back wall, which is normally the western long wall. Indeed, the broad-room temple was the standard type of shrine in Canaan in the Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age periods.⁶

Also, all the evidence speaks in favor of the final temple of the Old Kingdom at Tell Ibrahim Awad being originally a broad-room temple because the cult podium was constructed against the middle of the back wall. Secondly, according to the evidence of oblique bricks in the front wall just before the podium and a brick step outside, it seems that there was a central door, which was finally closed by bricks. This is the logical position for the door leading directly to the cult podium.

Already the original building had a second door at the northern end of the front wall. We find this feature precisely in the broad-room temple at Tel Yarmut in southern Canaan. This temple had also a second entrance at one end of the front wall (Fig. 4).⁷ Another feature typical of the broad-room temples in Canaan is the double back wall enclosing a corridor, which seems to have been used to store cult paraphernalia. Such corridors or succession of small rooms can be found in several broad-room temples of the Early Bronze Age such as the temples of Ay⁸ and the twin temples (4047 and 4050) *in antis* at Megiddo (Fig. 3).⁹ These temples were large and had columns to support the roof, while the small temple at Tell Ibrahim Awad did not need middle pillars.

In a later phase, as it seems, the temple was changed to a bent-axis temple (Fig. 2B), which again is a typical concept of an Ancient Near Eastern temple.¹⁰ In another alteration of the temple's design, the central entrance was closed with bricks and the shrine became only accessible from the northern side door. It is difficult, however, to say whether this happened already during the change of the temple's plan or later, for bent axis-temples also have frequently two doors, probably the northern door for entering and the southern door for exiting the shrine.¹¹

Instead of transferring the Holy of the Holies from the middle of the back wall to the southern sidewall, the usual place for the cult focus, the original podium was kept as the seat of the shrine. It was encased in its south and its east with an L-shaped wall opening it only towards the remaining northern door.

However, the question remains as to who was responsible for the construction of this series of temples of Near Eastern type in Tell Ibrahim Awad.¹² The material culture of Tell Ibrahim Awad seems, according to the excavations thus far completed, to be Egyptian. Also, the fragment of a terracotta statue of a baboon from the temple looks perfectly Egyptian,¹³ So does also its ritual outfit. All of the pottery is definitely Egyptian, and so

are the ex-voto objects such as figurines of baboons and other figurines and tiles.¹⁴ In the assemblage of finds, Early Bronze Age objects are missing. If the builders of those temples were of Near Eastern origin, they were largely acculturated, but clung in their sacred architecture to the models of their ancestors. One has, however, to concede that nothing of the settlement of the Old Kingdom temples has been excavated so far and that also temples of the Early Bronze Age in the Levant had cult inventories, which have to be largely classified as Egyptian.¹⁵ The plans of the temples make it cogent to see here traces of a community of Near Eastern origin.

It is certainly no coincidence that this site is only five miles from Tell el-Dab^a, a town with Asiatic inhabitants from the late Twelfth Dynasty until the end of the Hyksos Period.¹⁶ Also, at Tell el-Dab^a a bent-axis temple of very similar orientation has been found.¹⁷ The importance and the situation of Tell el-Dab^a has to be sought in its maritime connections. It was a harbor from the Middle Kingdom onwards, and the hundreds of ships, which Kamose boasted to have destroyed in its port can be taken as literary evidence.¹⁸ Recently a large rectangular harbor basin of c. 450 x 400 m has been discovered by geomagnetic surveying with an inlet and an outlet channel connected to the Pelusiac branch of the Nile (Fig. 5).¹⁹ After the discovery of a huge Tuthmosid palace precinct²⁰ with Minoan wall paintings²¹ and with military workshops,²² there is every reason to identify this site with Peru-nefer, the naval stronghold of Tuthmosis III and Amenophis II, which was revived by Horemheb.²³ The harbor of Pi-Ramesse can certainly be found at the same site.²⁴

The rationale behind building all the important harbors of the second millennium BC in the north-eastern Delta lies in the fact that harbors for seagoing ships in Egypt had to be connected with the sea during the months of drought (March to early July), when the Nile used to shrink to one fifth of its normal volume. During this season, river navigation became difficult if not impossible. Only places connected to the sea (which is in a distance up to 30 km from the sea) had a chance to function per-annually as harbors for sea navigation as the seawaters filled up the empty channels during the drought.²⁵ For this simple reason, the Memphite area never could have functioned as the major naval port of Peru-nefer.²⁶ The eastern Delta has a second advantage. As the easternmost Nile branch had east-north-easterly course, it is the only place in the Delta, where ships could use their sails leaving the port halfwinds (?) to the Mediterranean using the steady north-north-easterly wind (Fig. 6).²⁷ This was not possible when using central or western Nile branches. Also entering the easternmost Nile channels was feasible under sails.

The presence of Near-easterners in the north-eastern Nile Delta can be recognised more and more as a continuum from the Middle Kingdom throughout the Ramesside Period.²⁸ In the IInd I.P., we even have evidence of Asiatic temples and cults at Tell el-Dab^a.²⁹ This concept of an Asiatic town tied to maritime activities could perhaps be projected backwards. The region of Tell Ibrahim Awad and Tell el-Dab^a-Qantir

was in fact by nature best suited to be the main harbor of Egypt (Fig. 6). In addition, the employment of the inhabitants of the Levantine coast as sailors and possibly as shipbuilders is documented in the reliefs of a seaborne expedition bringing back Asiatics with their families in the reign of Sahure (Fig. 7). On the ships, they were sailors, and were positioned at the steering oars.³⁰ Also the reliefs at the Unas causeway show seagoing ships manned with Asiatics (Fig. 8),³¹ and the expression 'Kpny-ships',³² i.e., the Byblite ships, appearing in late Old Kingdom should be taken as another hint that Egypt depended not only on the raw material, the Lebanese cedar, but also on the people who had the experience and knowhow to build the best ships of their time.³³

Endnotes

- 1 I am indebted to Peter der Manuelian for accepting my contribution and to Ramadan Hussein for editing my English. The illustrations I owe to Nikky Math.
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- 5 See M. Bietak, 'Two Near Eastern Temples with Bent Axis in the Eastern Nile Delta,' *Egypt and the Levant 13* (2003), 13, 21-21; Bietak, 'The Predecessors of the Hyksos,' in S. Gitin, J. E. Wright and J. P. Dessel (eds), *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever* (Winona Lake, Indiana 2006: Eisenbrauns), 285-293; Bietak, 'Near Eastern Sanctuaries in the Eastern Nile Delta,' in *Baal, Hors-Série VI* (Beirut, 2009), 220-1.
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- 12 Plans in Eigner, *Egypt and the Levant 10* (2000), figs. 7-10; and identification in Bietak, *Egypt and the Levant 13* (2003), 13, 37; Bietak, in *Baal, Hors-Série VI* (Beirut 2009), 220-1.
- 13 W. van Haarlem, 'Apen in de Delta.' Apen in het oude Egypte: Archeologie en DNA-onderzoek, Allard Person Museum Amsterdam, *Dededingenblad* 78 (2000), Fig. 13; idem, *Temple Deposits at Tell Ibrahim Awad* (n. 4), 76, Fig. 42.
- 14 W. van Haarlem, *Temple Deposits at Tell Ibrahim Awad* (n. 4).
- 15 van Haarlem, *Temple Deposits at Tell Ibrahim Awad*, 85-91.
- 16 It was not only the capital of the Hyksos but also an important harbor town already in the Middle Kingdom and continued as a harbour town till the Ramesseid Period.
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- 21 Ibidem, Lit.: 165-73
- 22 Bietak, Dörner, and Janosi, *Egypt and the Levant* 11 (2001), 89-97.
- 23 Bietak, 'The Tuthmoside Stronghold Peru-nefer,' *Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (Spring 2005), 13-17; Bietak, 'Peru-nefer; The Principal New Kingdom Naval Base,' *Egyptian Archaeology* 34 (2009), 15-17; Bietak, 'Perunefer: An Update', *Egyptian Archaeology* 35 (2009), 16-17; Bietak, 'From where came the Hyksos and where did they go', in M. Marée (ed.), *The Second Intermediate Period (Thirteenth - Seventeenth Dynasties): Current Research, Future Prospects, OLA* 192 (Leuven, 2010), 139-181; Bietak, 'Minoan Presence in the Pharaonic Naval Base of Peru-nefer,' in O. Krzyszkowska (ed.), *Cretan Offerings: Studies in Honour of Peter Warren, BSA Studies* 18 (London, 2010), 11-24.
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- 25 Bietak, *Egyptian Archaeology* 35 (2009), 16-17; Bietak, 'From where came the Hyksos and where did they go' (n. 23).
- 26 S. Previous note.
- 27 I owe this suggestion to Ambassador Yussuf Mazhar from Egypt, president of the Cairo Yachting Club.
- 28 Bietak, 'From where came the Hyksos and where did they go' (n. 23).
- 29 Bietak, 'Avaris, The Capital of the Hyksos - Recent Excavations at Tell el-Dab^a', *The First Raymond and Beverly Sackler Foundation Distinguished Lecture in Egyptology* (London, 1996), 36-41; Bietak, in *Baal, Hors-Série* VI, (Beirut 2009), 109-15.
- 30 L. Borchardt, Das Grabdenkmal des Königs *S'asḥw-re'*, II, Die Wandbilder. Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Orientgesellschaft in Abusir 1902-1908., 26. Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orient Gesellschaft, (Berlin 1913: Deutsche Orientgesellschaft), 27-8, 87, pls 12-3; Bietak, 'Zur Marine des Alten Reiches,' in J. Baynes, H. James and A. Leahy (eds), *Pyramids Studies and other Essays presented to I. E. S. Edwards* (London, 1988), 36-8, pls 5-7.
- 31 Bietak, in Baynes, James and Leahy (eds), *Pyramids Studies and other Essays presented to I. E. S. Edwards*, 36-8, pl. 8.
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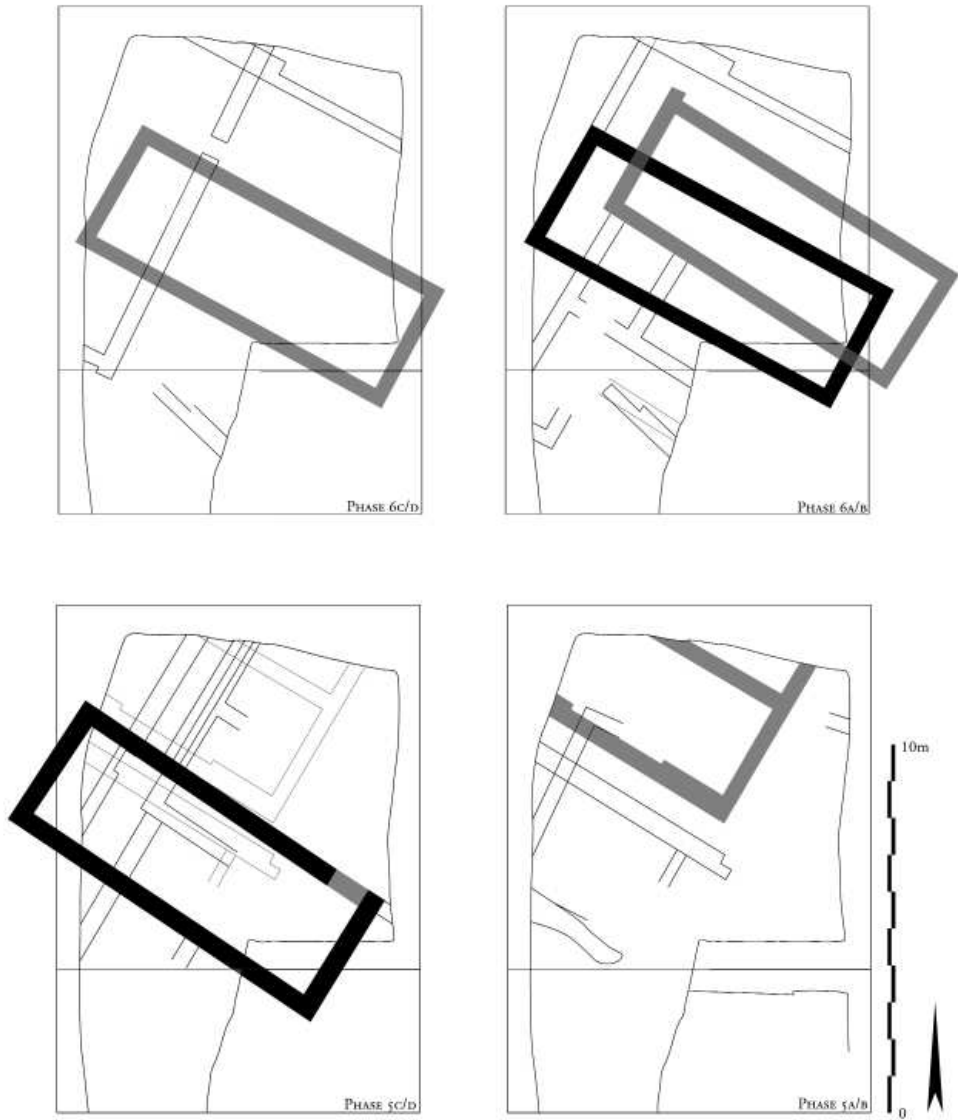


Fig. 1. The earliest temple remains of Tell Ibrahim Awad (after Eigner, 2000, figs 8-9)

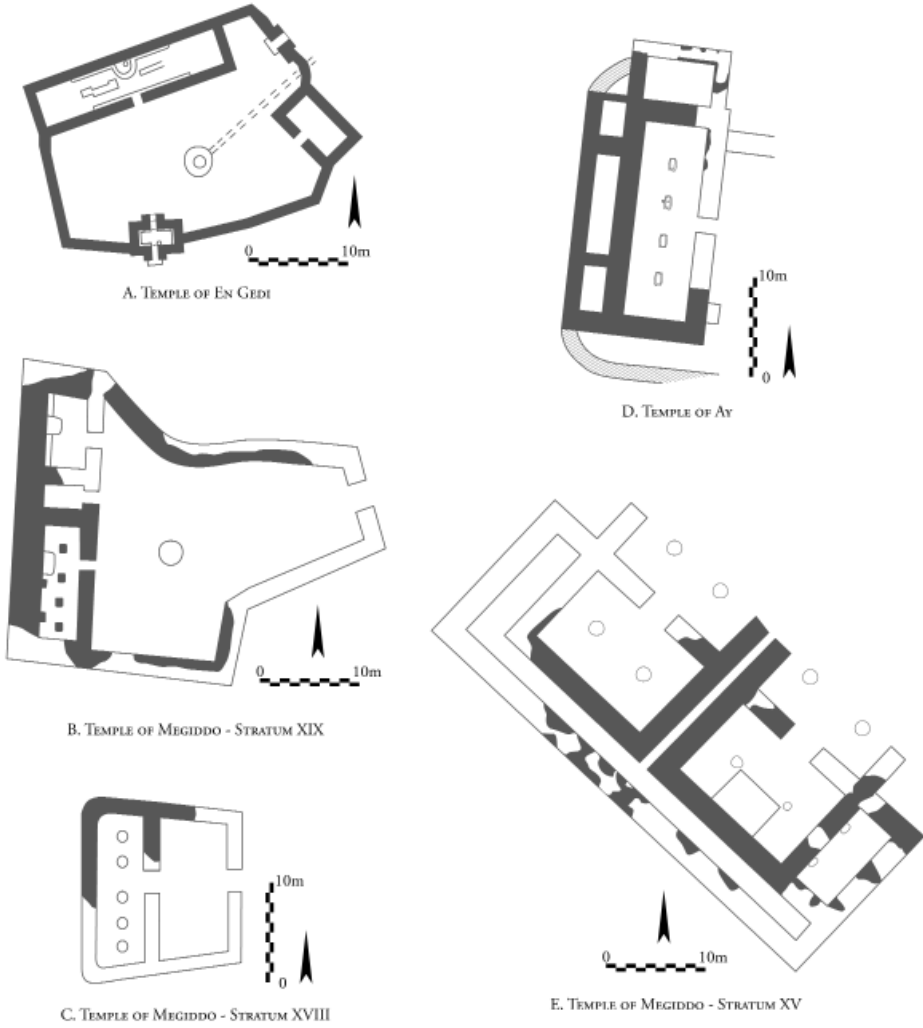


Fig. 3. Broadroom-temples in the Levant (after Ben-Tor 1992, fig. 3.11; fig. 4.3; fig. 4.15; fig. 4.16).

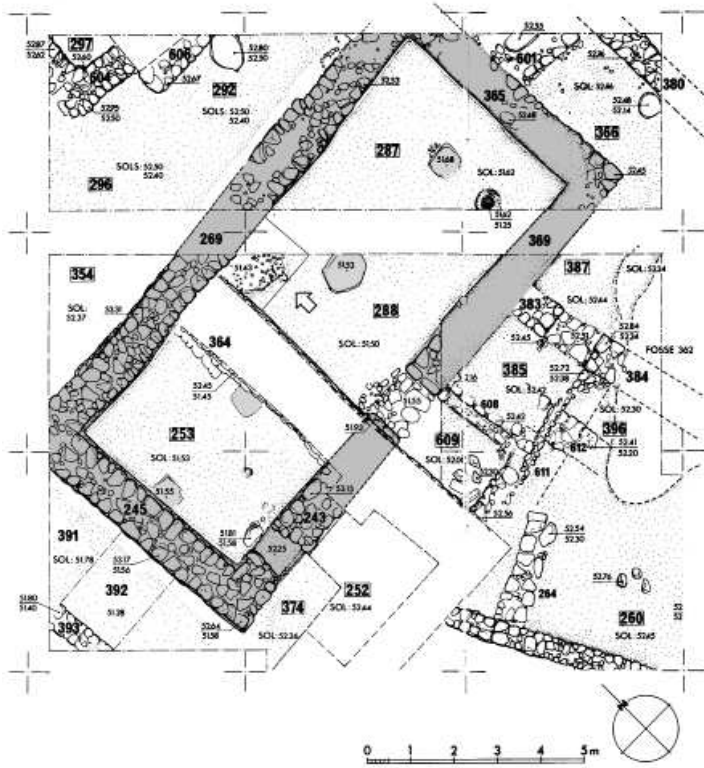


Fig. 4. Temple of Yarmut (after Pierre de Miroschedji 1988, fig. 2).

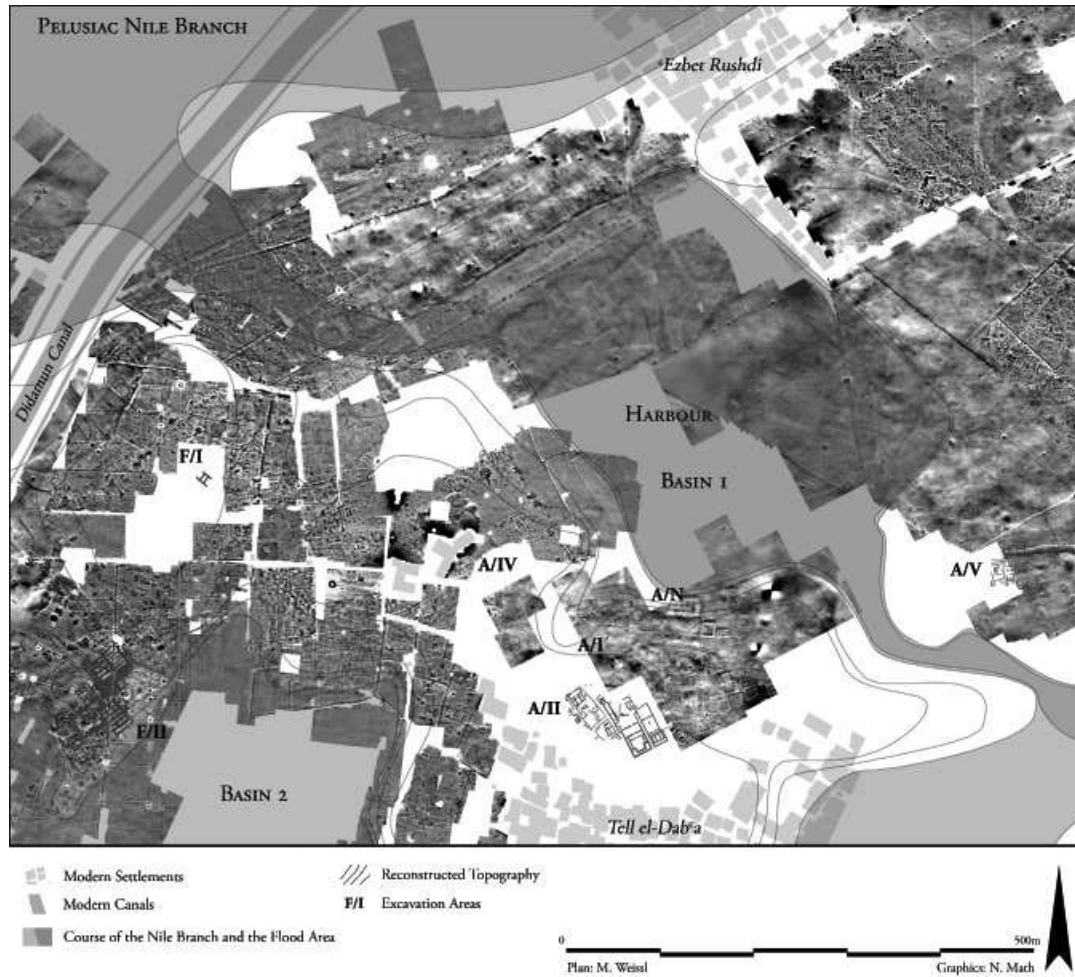


Fig. 5. The site of Tell el-Dab'a with the harbor basin disclosed by geophysical surveying (after Forstner-Müller 2009, 10).

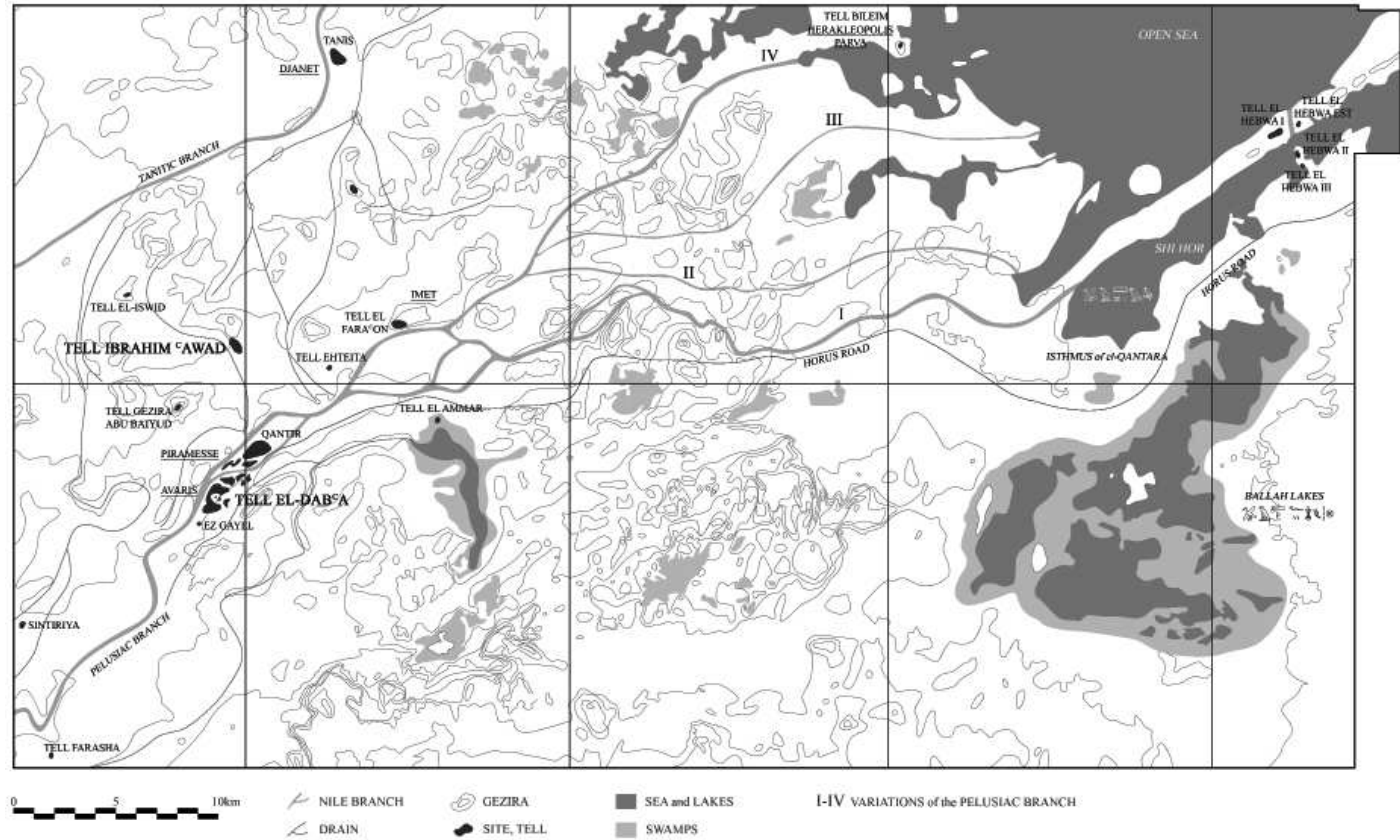


Fig. 6. Map of the north-eastern Nile Delta with the sites of Tell Ibrahim Awad and Tell el-Dab'a-Qantir (after Bietak 2003, fig. 1).

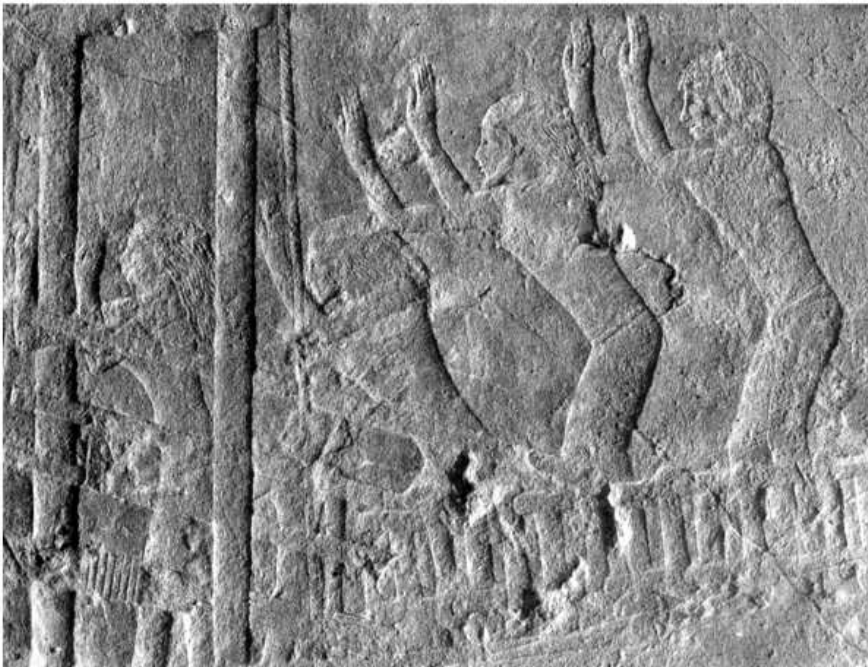


Fig. 7. Relief from the Temple of Sahure showing Asiatic sailors brought back by the Egyptian fleet (after Bietak, 1988, figs 6-7).

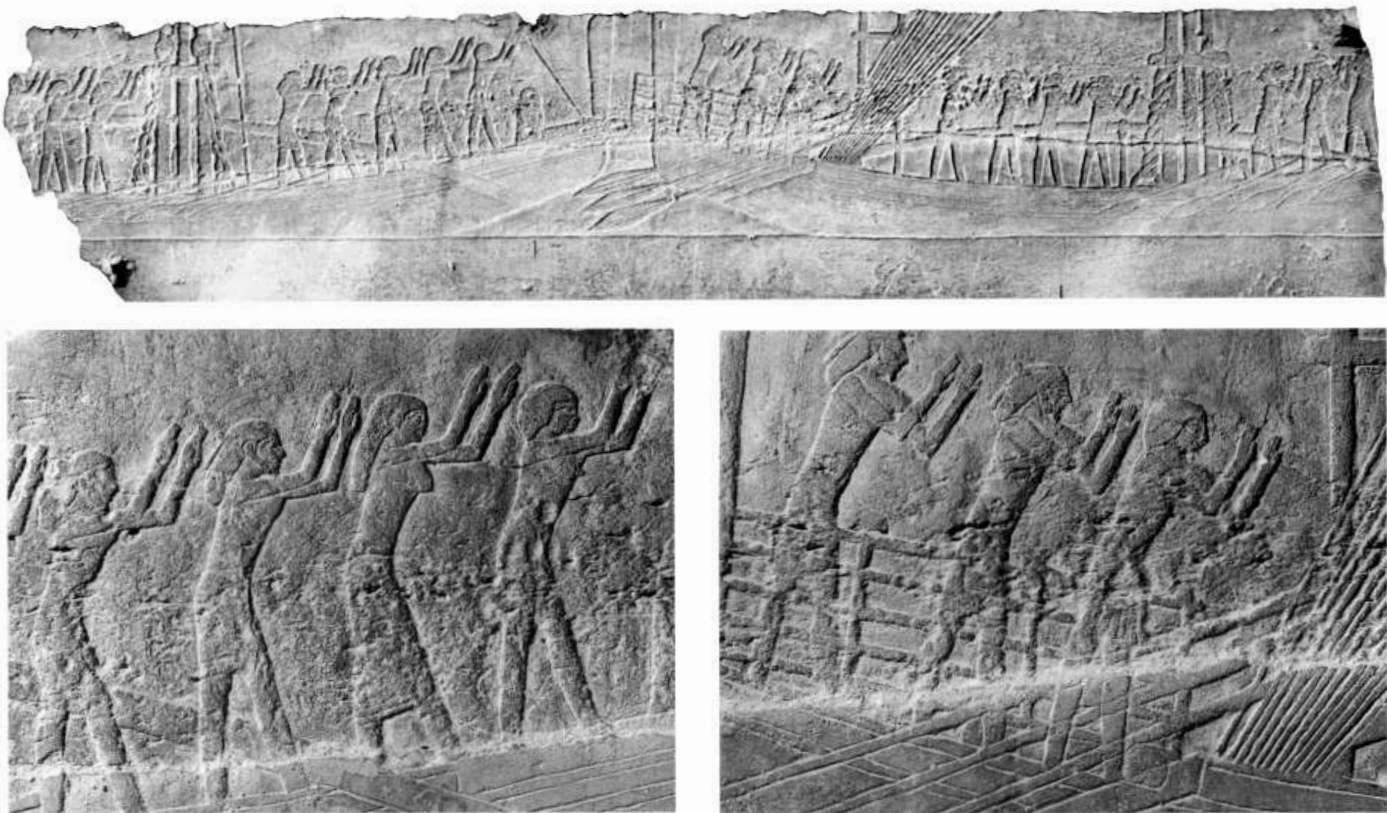


Fig. 8. Relief from the causeway of Unas with Asiatic sailors (after Bietak, 1988, pl. 8).