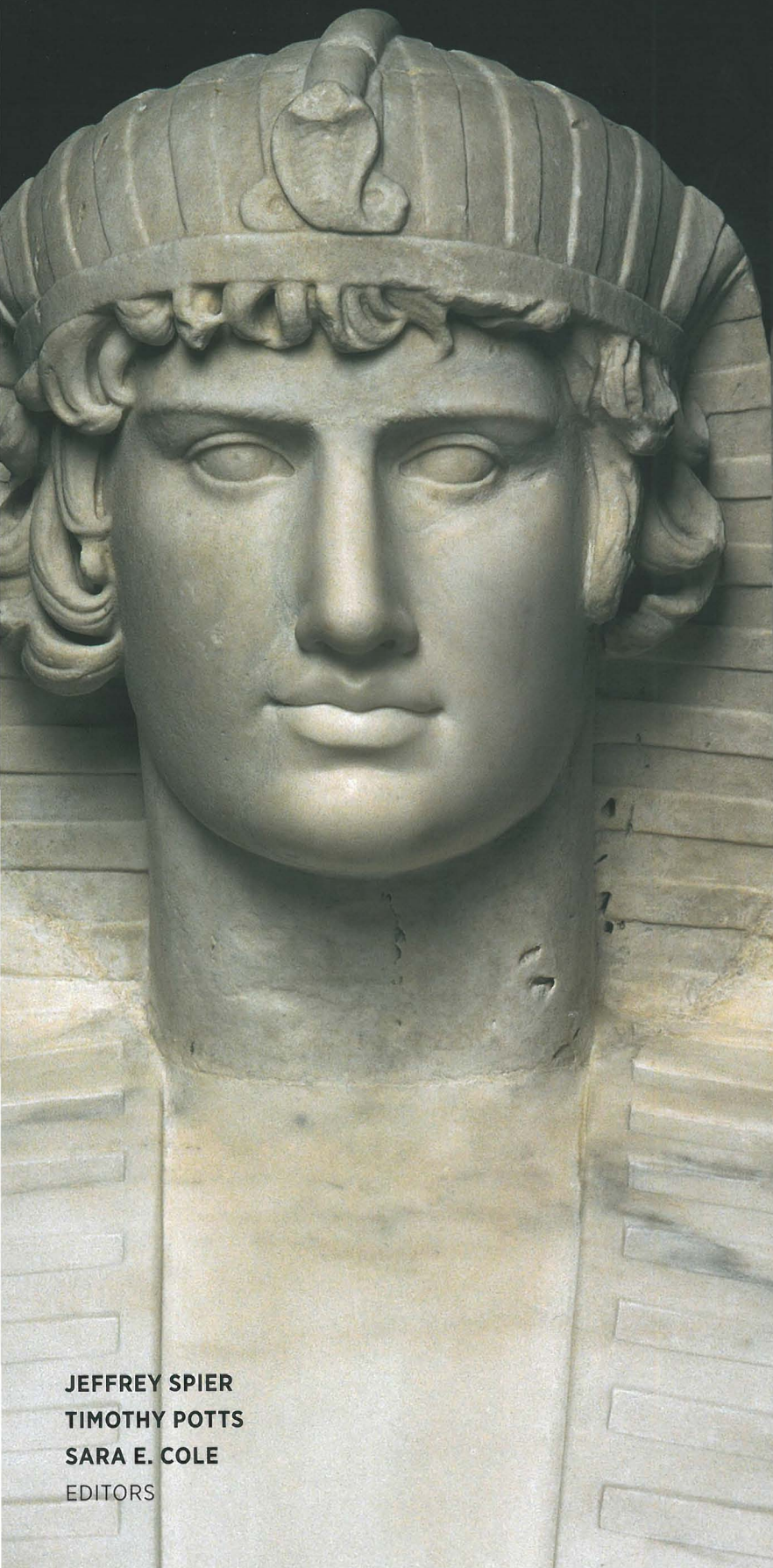


BEYOND THE NILE

EGYPT AND THE CLASSICAL WORLD



JEFFREY SPIER
TIMOTHY POTTS
SARA E. COLE
EDITORS



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THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM | LOS ANGELES

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Contact Points: Avaris and Pi-Ramesse

MANFRED BIETAK AND
CONSTANCE VON RÜDEN

Both the ancient Hyksos capital of Avaris (Dynasty 15; ca. 1650–1550 BC) and the New Kingdom town of Pi-Ramesse (Dynasty 19; ca. 1295–1186 BC) are located in the area of modern Tell el-Dab‘a/Qantir in the eastern Nile Delta. Constructed partly on top of ancient mounds (tells) on so-called turtlebacks, they are situated on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile and hence have a perennially navigable river connection to the sea. The center of the older Hyksos capital is situated slightly south of the later Ramesside town, but spatially the two cities overlap to a large extent. Continuities can be observed, for instance, in the hybridity of the material culture and ritual practices. The inhabitants of later Pi-Ramesse were conscious of the site’s Hyksos past and continued to use the “Harbor of Avaris” as a toponym for that region of the town.¹

To reach the sites of ancient Avaris or Pi-Ramesse from the Mediterranean, a ship was one of the most convenient ways of traveling, and also the most efficient means of transporting larger cargoes, as seen, for example, in the case of the famous Late Bronze Age shipwreck from Uluburun.² Nonetheless, it would be a misunderstanding to consider such a journey an easy undertaking. In antiquity, the Nile’s volume at the flood’s peak during September would have been about fourteen times that of the period of drought in the spring, when the water shrank to only one-fifth of the normal volume. Nile navigation during the period of drought was not only dangerous, but also a strenuous adventure, always accompanied by the fear of running aground on a sandbank and the frequent struggle to either tow a ship upstream or “bounce” it from a bank. Such perils could be overcome, however, if the harbor was still situated within the effect of seawater filling the nearly empty Nile channels until about twenty-five miles upstream. Nevertheless, sailors had to navigate several dangers when entering the Nile’s mouths: shifting river

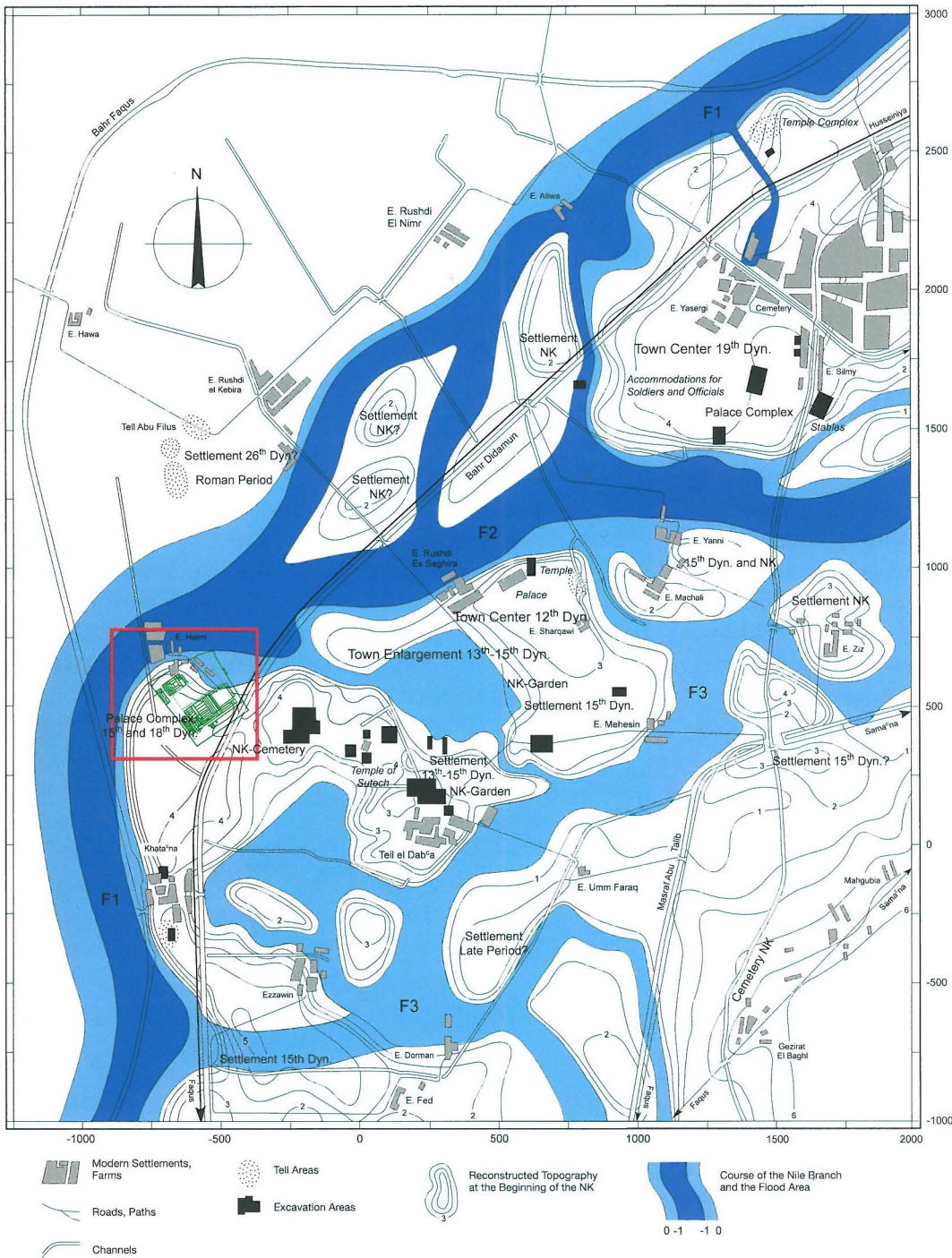


FIGURE 8 | Map of Hyksos capital Avaris (Dynasty 15) and New Kingdom town of Pi-Ramesse (Dynasty 19) in the area of modern Tell el-Dab'a/Qantir. See figure 9 for details of the Thutmomid palace complex, outlined here in red, and figure 10 for a detailed plan of Palace G

mouths and channels, and unpredictable swirls when the waves from the sea met the outpouring river.³ But after having overcome these challenges, and with the help of a northwestern wind, a ship's crew could sail upstream and after about twenty miles reach a point where they could approach the ancient town on the eastern bank of the river (fig. 8).

The site itself was enclosed at the western edge by the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, while a meandering old water branch framed it from the southeast. Together with its accessibility from the sea, this almost island-like geography already hints at one of

the site's major roles as a contact zone between inner Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea, the latter permitting access to a great diversity of neighboring civilizations in Anatolia, the Levant, Cyprus, and the Aegean.

In the Ramesside period, a ship would have first passed by the town center of Pi-Ramesse, which is situated in the area of the northernmost turtlebacks. Papyri give exuberant eulogies of this city as the marshalling place of the (pharaoh's) chariotry, the mustering place of the army, and the mooring place of the ship's troops. Excavations and a geomagnetic survey have brought to

light temples, a palatial building, metal and glass workshops, barracks, a chariot garrison, and perhaps even a small harbor basin of Dynasties 19 and 20. Settlement remains of Dynasty 18 suggest the establishment of a site here before the foundation of Pi-Ramesse. During this rather late period of the thirteenth century BC, ships arriving at Pi-Ramesse would have proceeded further south, passing by two smaller river islands, toward the larger southern harbors, situated in ancient Avaris and still referred to at that time as “Harbor of Avaris.” On the way, the crew would have encountered a river bend. There, just above the stream on low land already elevated during the Second Intermediate Period, the ship’s crew could have sighted a citadel with impressive enclosure walls built during the Hyksos period. If a ship were to pass by this point only 150 years later, in the Thutmosid period, the citadel would have been replaced by a tremendous palatial district, which will be explored in more detail below. In both cases, these buildings visually dominated this crucial point where ships turned left to enter the harbor.⁴ The harbor’s basin extended up to 400 × 450 meters and was connected to both above-mentioned Nile branches.⁵ If we indeed believe the description of the second Kamose Stela (Dynasty 17), which refers to Avaris from the perspective of an invading enemy during the later Hyksos period, hundreds of ships were moored in the harbor(s) carrying all the coveted goods from the Levant.⁶ This arrangement remained largely unchanged until the Ramesside period, during which time the fleet of the pharaoh was located in the same area.⁷ Thanks to the information from both written sources and geomorphological research, it seems very likely that the site never lost its role as a central and frequented Nile harbor over this approximately 400-year period.

After tying up a ship at the mole, the next step would have been to unload its cargo. Such a scene is represented in the Dynasty 18 tomb of Qenamun in Thebes, where a Syrian crew in colorful garments is about to unload goods that were intended to be exchanged on shore.⁸ It is of interest that the owner of the tomb held, among other offices, the role of chief steward of Peru-nefer, the naval center of Amenhotep II. The location of Peru-nefer is still debated,⁹ but recently its identification with the site of Tell el-Dab’a has again been proposed by Manfred Bietak,¹⁰ a thesis that would close the chronological gap of the harbor’s use between the Hyksos and Ramesside periods.

Qenamun’s tomb painting reflects a scene easily imaginable for the harbor of Tell el-Dab’a during the main sailing season. There, the presence of “Byblos ships” from the Levant and “*Keftiu* ships” from the Aegean, as described in the dockyard annals of Peru-nefer, was surely a common sight.¹¹ Indeed, such a harbor must have created an interregional atmosphere where traders, seamen, and craftspeople would have met to exchange

goods, ideas, and experiences. This multicultural mingling was not restricted to the more practical side of economic life; it also entered the sphere of ritual, politics, and art. These practices would perhaps have produced what Richard White has called a “middle ground,” a mixture of elements of the different involved groups that created a common, mutually comprehensible and symbolically mediated world.¹²

During Dynasty 18, a ship’s crew would perhaps still have seen some ruins of the earliest settlement quarter dating back to the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period in the north, while on the southwestern flank the areas of modern Tell el-Dab’a and ‘Ezbet Helmi spread out on a large, elongated turtleback. A focus for all the sailors was surely the temple of Seth, located directly above the harbor. An enclosure wall constructed during Dynasty 18 enlarged the precinct, which seemingly was rebuilt under Tutankhamun and Horemheb and again under Seti I, father of Ramesses II. The god Seth can here be understood as an *interpretatio aegyptiaca* of the Syrian storm god Baal-Zephon, well known as the protector of sailors in the Nile Delta from the late Middle Kingdom¹³ to the Ramesside period.¹⁴ His cult was implanted at the site by the late Middle Kingdom (ca. 1700 BC) and was commemorated four hundred years later with a stela, originally set up in front of the temple. He was not depicted as the Egyptian god Seth, however, but as Baal-Zephon. This image of the god fulfills a role here that formerly had not existed in the Egyptian pantheon and which is perhaps best illustrated by a locally cut hematite cylinder seal from a Dynasty 13 context in Tell el-Dab’a, depicting the god standing on two mountains above a sailing ship.¹⁵ This iconography and the temple’s position above the harbor align closely with the role of Baal in Canaanite cults as the protector and god of seamen and as the one who had subdued Yam, the personification of the unpredictable sea. A sailor, who was an integrated part of the “middle ground,” whether he came from the Levant, Egypt, Cyprus, or even the Aegean, may have entered the precinct of Seth/Baal to pay homage to this god for his and his crew’s safe passage over the sea.

A ship’s crew might include not only traders but also messengers from one of Egypt’s Mediterranean neighbors, for instance, from the Levant or even from the Aegean. In this case, the messenger needed to proceed beyond the harbor and the temple of Seth toward the site’s western fringes. There, the large palatial precinct of the Thutmosid period (ca. 1479–1400 BC) was situated. The precinct’s sheer size of 5.5 hectares (13.6 acres), as well as its position above the river and its role as a landmark for river navigation, makes its royal character extremely probable. It was built on the same ground as a palatial precinct of the late Hyksos period but with a different orientation, while it shows

topographical relations to an older Hyksos palace, situated in the southeast on the bank of the easternmost branch of the river.¹⁶

When the messenger finally reached the quadrangular enclosure wall, he probably entered it through the monumental gate with pylons to the northeast. Then his gaze would have been directed toward the two major palaces on high platforms, Palaces F and G (fig. 9), separated by an artificial lake at a distance of precisely 150 cubits (78.75 m). Other buildings, such as a far smaller palace (J) constructed just south of Palace G and the magazines behind Palace F, were then not directly visible to him. This architectural arrangement leaves no doubt that the precinct was constructed by the same planning body, even though some additions and changes were made later, when workshops and offices replaced Palace J,¹⁷ and more workshops were added northeast of the ramp of Palace F,¹⁸ as well as outside the compound in the northeast. These workshops produced calcite vessels and inlaid furniture, as well as weaponry, such as sling-shots, arrows with imported Aegean arrow tips, and chain mail.

Today, the substructures of both major palaces are preserved, built in casemate fashion of mud bricks with compartments, mostly filled up with soil. Palace G was documented by geomagnetic survey and to a large extent by excavation (fig. 10).¹⁹ Its length reached 167.3 meters, and the height of the platform can be estimated to 7.35 meters based on the gradient angle of the entrance ramp. Beyond this, its spatial division can be reconstructed only with the help of the building foundations and comparisons with Egyptian palaces in general, but this nonetheless leads to some very interesting results. If a Mediterranean messenger planned to enter the larger Palace G, he would probably have first been guided to the substructure to the left of the access ramp. There, a bath with a stone basin was situated,²⁰ which suggests that whoever was about to enter the palace was obliged to bathe and be anointed with aromatic oils imported from Cyprus. Then the messenger would have climbed the accession ramp and entered a square courtyard of 90 × 90 cubits (41 × 41 m) through the western colonnade. The immense size of

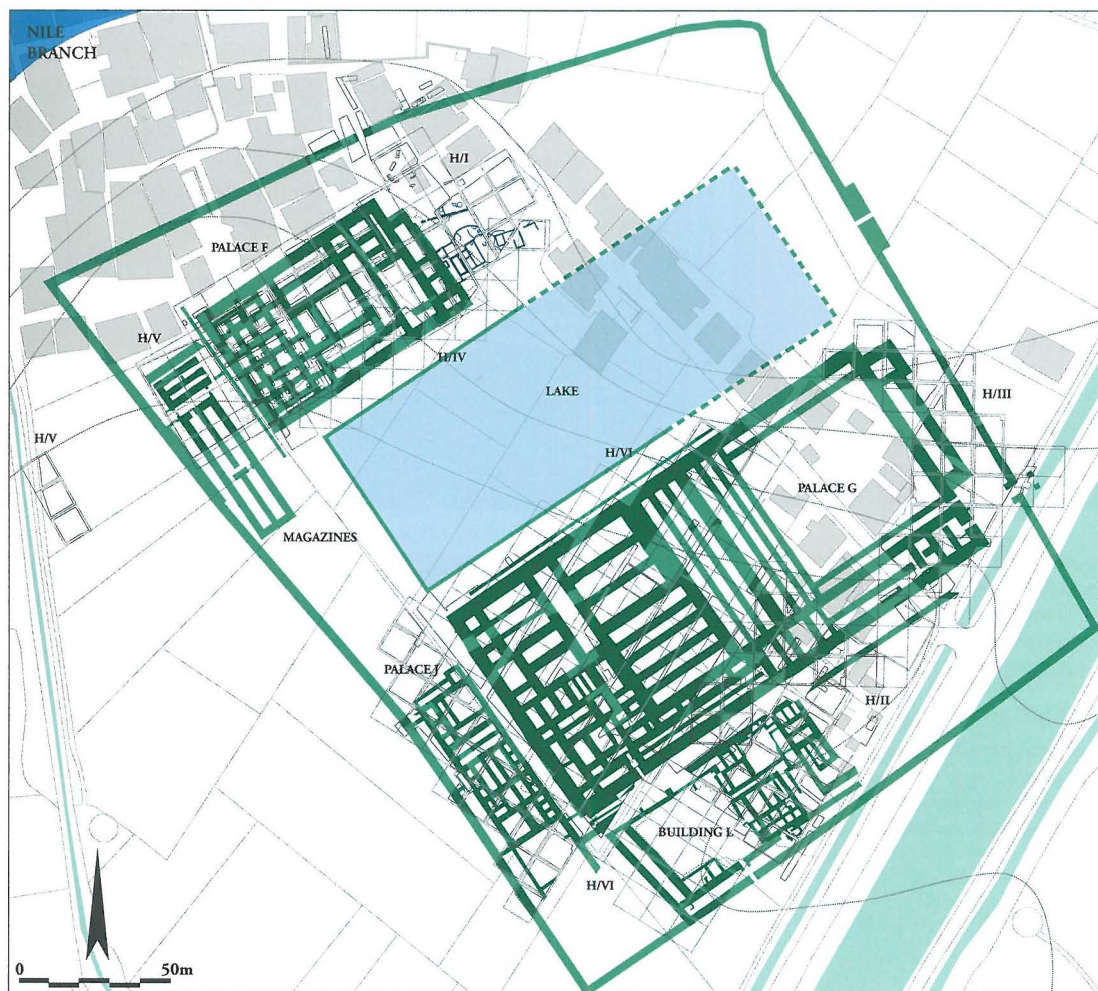


FIGURE 9 | Palace complex of various periods, including Palaces F and G of the Thutmosid period, Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a)

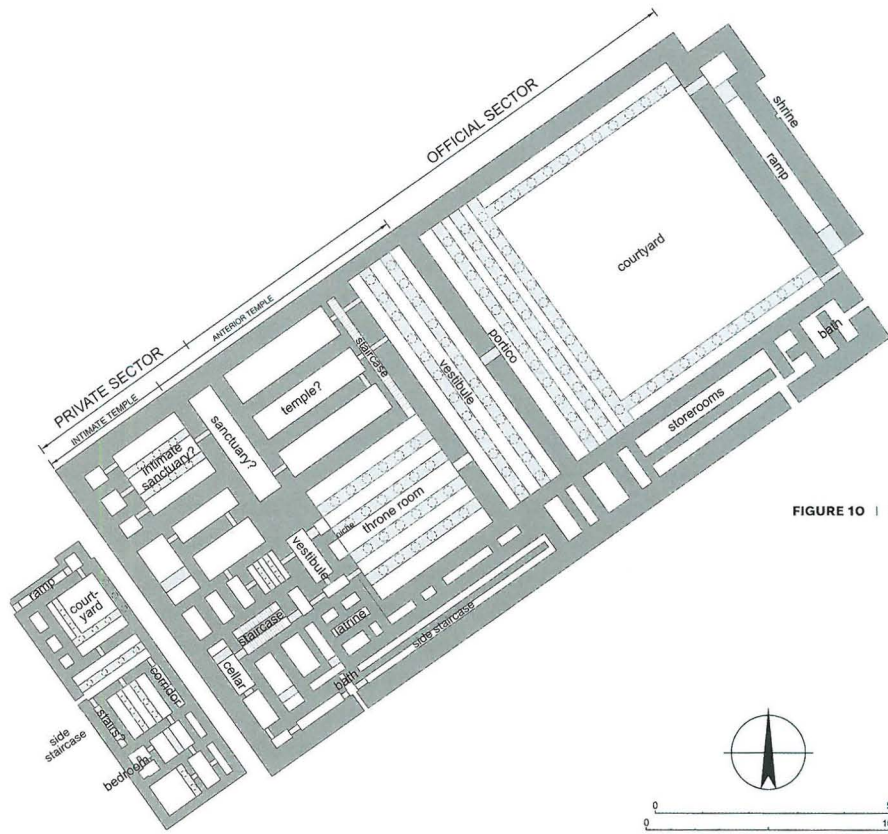


FIGURE 10 | Plan of Palace G, Thutmosid period, Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a)

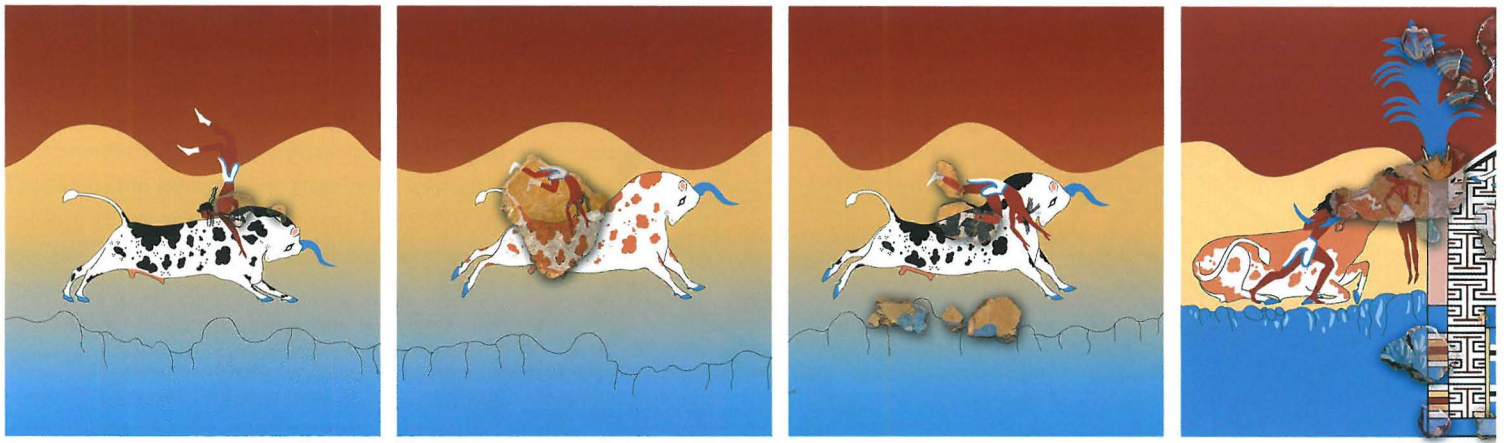


FIGURE 11 | Bull-leapers, Minoan, made in Egypt, Thutmosid period. Reconstructed fresco. Fragments collected from ancient dumps in front of Palaces F and G, Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a)

FIGURE 12 | Running leopard, Minoan, made in Egypt, Thutmosid period. Reconstructed fresco. Fragments collected from ancient dumps in front of Palaces F and G, Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a)



the precinct and the building itself surely evoked a mixture of respect and fear. At the opposite end of the courtyard, a portico marked the transition to the roofed part of the palace. Perhaps, if his status allowed it, the messenger would even have been permitted to proceed to the throne room. Passing by several guards and servants of the king, he would next have entered the vestibule, which led not only to the throne room, but likely also to a typical Thutmosid temple. Such a spatial integration of temple activities is well known from Near Eastern palaces,²¹ demonstrating the strong entanglement of the religious and political spheres and emphasizing the pharaoh's religious authority. The throne room measured 55 × 55 cubits (25.1 × 25.1 m) and is the largest in any known palace in Egypt. The substructure includes the typical foundation walls for four rows of columns, found also in the palaces of Deir el-Ballas North, in the so-called Southern Harim at Tell el-'Amarna, and in the anteroom to the throne room in the early phase of the temple palace of Amenhotep III at Malqata.²²

Palaces G and F are similar in their general plans and share some specific elements, though Palace F is much smaller in scale and has fewer colonnades and columns, indicating a hierarchy between the two. Most importantly, both palaces were furnished with wall paintings and stucco reliefs, whose technique and iconography are essentially the same as those known to us from the Aegean and especially from Minoan Crete.²³ They were not found in situ on the walls but were collected from ancient dumps in front of the landings and at the base of the ramps (figs. 11, 12; cat. 44). The paintings on hard lime plaster had clearly flaked off substantial walls of mud brick (such walls usually shrink over the course of a decade or more, especially when constructed on alluvial ground).

The furnishing of these palaces with such wall paintings is surely not what one would have expected from an Egyptian palace, especially as Egyptian royal iconography is entirely missing. Although the architecture seems to follow Egyptian tradition—emphasizing an axial alignment—the way of painting is borrowed, perhaps together with its master painters, from a region where the architecture repeatedly forces visitors to turn around corners and to steadily redirect their sight, and where axial-view relationships are rare. Thus, from the moment the messenger entered the roofed area of Palace G, he would have been confronted with hunting scenes, animal fights, or composite beings, perhaps known to him from the Aegean but presented in an unusually direct and more axial arrangement due to the different architecture; the painted scenes were also embedded in a different ritual and social environment. Thus, the architecture coupled with the paintings created a hybrid space for this central political and ideological facility of the site.

This harbor site on the eastern bank of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile was, at least since the Hyksos period, one of the most important contact zones between the Mediterranean and inner Egypt. Regarding Egyptian–Aegean relations, the Thutmosid period is of special interest. It is often considered the zenith of contact, in which *Keftiu* delegations were depicted in the tombs of noblemen in Thebes (cat. 42, 43),²⁴ and Aegean influences in Egyptian art became increasingly evident. It is exactly during this phase that we can identify at least three different places at the site that can be characterized as hybrid spaces, each within a different social sphere. The first is the harbor, where seamen and craftspeople met and exchanged experiences, perhaps concentrated primarily on economic concerns. The second is the Seth temple, which united Levantine and Egyptian ritual practices, central for those people involved in overseas exchange. And the last is the Thutmosid palace, where the interweaving of different cultural practices is expressed in the central architecture and art of the highest political sphere. This entanglement of different cultures, traceable at the site of Tell el-Dab'a/Qantir and resulting from migration as well as economic, ritual, and social communication, formed the basis for the prosperity and creative achievements that characterized the eastern Mediterranean in the Bronze Age.

- 1 Yoyotte 1971–72, 167–73; Bietak 1975, 30, N. 37, 187F; Turayev 2013, 43–80, plate XIII.
- 2 Yalçın, İpek, and Medenbach 2005.
- 3 Cooper 2012, 26–27.
- 4 Forstner-Müller et al. 2015.
- 5 Forstner-Müller 2014.
- 6 Habachi 1972, 36–37.
- 7 Papyrus Anastasi III, 7.5–6; translation: Caminos 1954, 101.
- 8 Davies and Faulkner 1947, plate 8.
- 9 For a short summary of the discussion, see Jeffreys 2006.
- 10 Bietak 2009; Bietak 2010a; Bietak 2010b; Bietak 2013b; Bietak 2016; while mainstream Egyptology located it at or near Memphis: Glanville 1931, 109; Glanville 1932; Helck 1939, 49–50; Säve-Söderbergh 1946, 37–39; Badawi 1948, 34–36, 55–63, 137–39; Edel 1953, 155; Stadelmann 1967, 32–35; Helck 1971, 160, 166, 356–57, 447–48, 454–56, 460, 471, 473, 501; Kamish 1985; Kamish 1986; Der Manuelian 1987, 159; Jeffreys and Smith 1988, 61; Zivie 1988, 107.
- 11 British Museum Papyrus 10056, dated by Glanville to the time of Thutmose III (1931, 105–7) and by Wente and van Siclen to the reign of Amenhotep II (1976, 229).
- 12 White 1991.
- 13 Bietak 2011c, 22–23.
- 14 Stadelmann 1967; Tazawa 2009; Zivie-Coche 2011.
- 15 Porada 1984, 487; Bietak 1990, 15, fig. 5.
- 16 Bietak and Forstner-Müller 2009; Bietak 2010c; Bietak 2011a; Bietak 2011b.
- 17 Bietak 2004.
- 18 Bietak, Dorner, and Jánosi 2001.
- 19 T. Herbig and J. Dorner in Bietak, Dorner, and Jánosi 2001, fig. 33.
- 20 Fuscaldo 2001.
- 21 Textual evidence: Behrens and Klein 1998–2001; Novák 2002; de Clercq 2004, 38–41, 92–99, 156–61, 168–72.
- 22 For bibliography on Malqata, see Iida and Watanabe 1993; Arnold 2003, 136–37; <http://imalqata.wordpress.com>; <http://www.metmuseum.org/research/archaeological-fieldwork/malqata-egypt>
- 23 Bietak 2000; Bietak et al. 2007, 68–81; von Rügen 2015.
- 24 Vercoutter 1956; Wachsmann 1987; Matthäus 1995; Panagiotopoulos 2001; Duhoux 2003; Panagiotopoulos 2006.