Avaris/Tell el-Dabʿa

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Ancient Avaris (a Greek rendering of the Ancient Egyptian toponym *Ḥw.t wʿr.t*) was the capital of the HYKSOS, and was conquered by AHMOSE I ca. 1530 BCE, as we know from a tomb inscription of his namesake, the naval officer Ahmose, son of Ibana at El-Kab. It was at Avaris that Theban ships entered a waterway, the "Djedeku of Avaris." Tell el-Dabʿa was also very likely to have been the site of the naval base of PERU-NEFER, and became the southern part of PIRAMESSE, the Delta residence of Rameses II.

Situated between the easternmost NILE branch and a side branch, Avaris was surrounded by water and was located at the start of the Horus Road to the Sinai and Palestine (Figure 1). JOSEPHUS (*Ap*. 1.14.78) describes the site as a fortified town, very favorably situated in the Sethroïte nome, east of the Bubastic branch of the Nile. According to Ostracon Gardiner, the easternmost branch of the Nile was named after the town as "Water of Avaris." The association of the town with the god Seth/Baʿal (Typhon) was remembered right up to Roman times (*Ap*. 1.26.237–8), but its exact position had been forgotten.

During the Middle Bronze Age, the town was one of the biggest in the Mediterranean and, during the Hyksos period, sprawled over 640 acres. The source of this success was the favorable harbor location, with a wide rectangular basin, connected to the Nile system with one or two channels. The site was within reach of Mediterranean waters even during the dry period in spring. A second harbor was sited directly at the banks of the river.

Two planned settlements from the early 12th Dynasty were found on both sides of the harbor. The Second Kamose Stela makes reference to a big harbor, and the harbor at Avaris was still in operation as part of Piramesse, according to naos door inscriptions of the 20th Dynasty (now in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow).

The site was explored in 1895 by Édouard Naville, in the 1940s by Labib Habachi, into the 1950s by Shehata Adam (ʿEzbet Rushdi), and during 1966–2011, with 75 excavation and study campaigns by Manfred Bietak. During 2010–15 excavations were continued at ʿEzbet Rushdi by Irene Forstner-Müller. The stratigraphy of the site covers strata from the 12th Dynasty onward, beginning with Phase N (Figure 2). The name *Ḥw.t wʿr.t* ("Estate: Door of the Two Ways of Khety") may suggest a planned settlement inhabited as early as the Herakleopolitan period. The town was particularly important during the Second Intermediate Period and the whole of the 18th Dynasty. The strata of the Ramesside period have, however, been largely destroyed by leveling.

The most important site is F/I, with a planned settlement from the early 12th Dynasty (Phase N Figure 3); another planned settlement with a memorial temple for Amenemhat I was constructed by Senwosret III at ʿEzbet Rushdi (Phase M–K). The Egyptian town was encroached upon during the late 12th Dynasty by a settlement of Canaanites, with their own foreign types of houses (middle-room, broad-room, and hearth-house), and a cemetery of weapon-bearers and high dignitaries (Figure 4). A chapel on top of a big tomb contained a larger-than-life-size statue of a high-ranking prince (Phase H). At the same site (F/I) we find two sprawling mansions dating from the beginning of the 13th Dynasty, one of which grew to 2,400 m^2 in size. A third mansion, situated northwest of the others, has been detected by magnetometer survey. South of the two mansions were gardens, which were later used as a cemetery for dignitaries residing in those mansions. From this phase (G/4) seems to originate a high-quality statue of another Western Asiatic dignitary with a mushroom-shaped coiffure, now in the Museum of Egyptian Art in Munich (ÄS 7171).

Here, the houses and tombs are largely Egyptian in architectural style, but the burial customs – with donkey and goat burials and a prestigious Near Eastern type of weapons in

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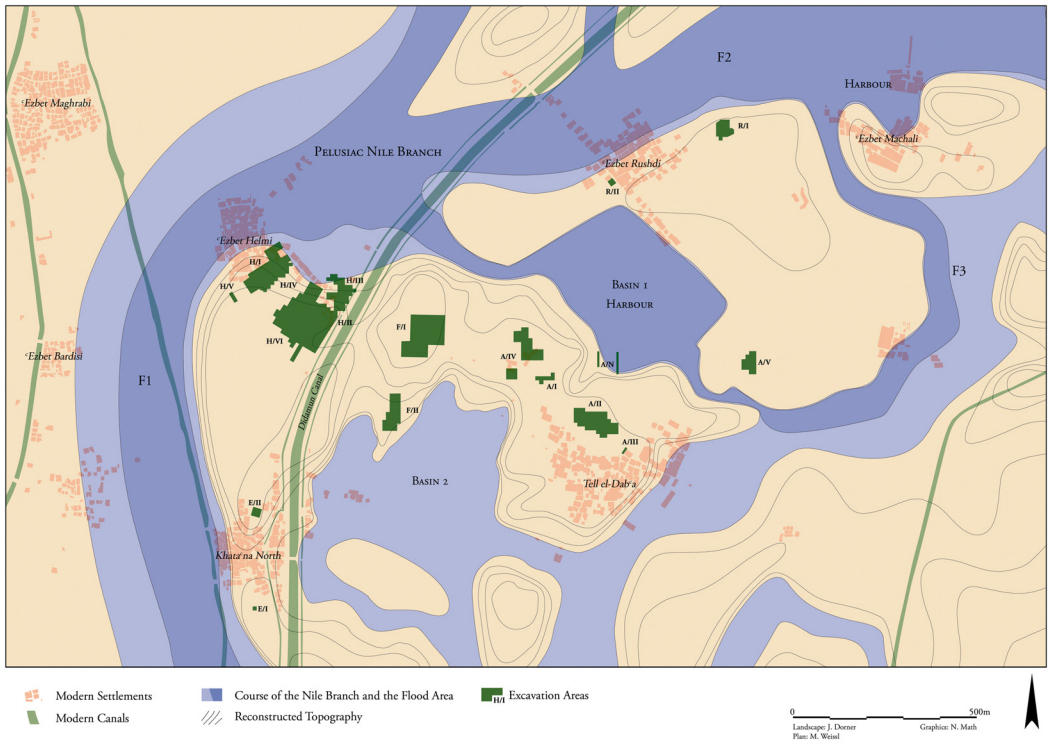

FIGURE 1 The topography of Avaris/Tell el-Dabʿa (after Josef Dorner, in Czerny 1999, fig. 1).

the tombs – show that those interred were of Western Asiatic origin. A scarab with the title of a "Ruler of Retjenu" – a designation for nearly the whole of Canaan – raises the suspicion that this was the title bestowed by the Egyptians upon the highest dignitary of this Asiatic community, with this tomb apparently one of their burial places. A "Brother of the Prince of Retjenu" accompanied Egyptian expeditions to the Sinai in the time of Amenemhet III. It appears that the function of the Rulers of Retjenu was to initiate and help supervise, on the Egyptian monarchy's behalf, foreign trade with the Levant, and probably expeditions to the Sinai and other places. Their expertise lay in organizing shipping and Levantine links.

There seems to have been some turmoil at a later point, with statues smashed and the mansions abandoned. Soon afterward, an egalitarian settlement pattern is to be seen on top of the mansions and in the Eastern Town (area A/II, Phase G/1–3). The plots were large, with burials carried out inside the courtyards. During this time, the percentage of imported and locally made Middle Bronze Age pottery went up from the previous level of 16 percent to nearly 20 percent, and soon afterward to 40 percent. The process of acculturation to Egyptian norms not only halted, but there seems also to have been a surge in Canaanite cultural traits and trappings.

The core of the original 12th Dynasty town at ʿEzbet Rushdi appears to have been continuously settled by Egyptians until the end of the Hyksos period, while people originating from the Levant settled around the old town. A seal impression from that period is the first to reveal a mayor of the new toponym *Ḥw.t w'r.t* (Avaris), suggesting that a new political

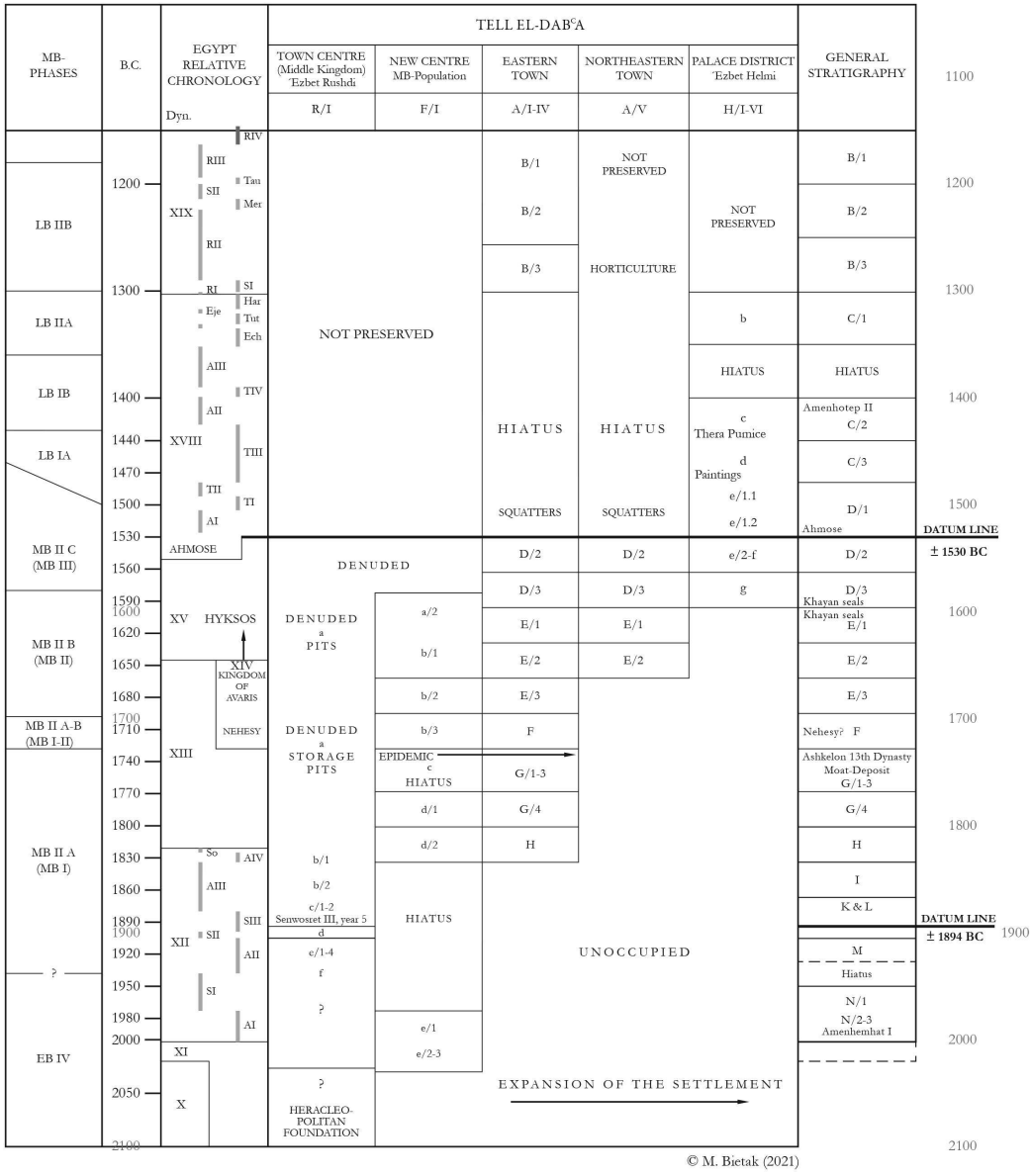

FIGURE 2 Overview of the stratigraphy of Tell el-Dab'a. © Manfred Bietak.

era was being ushered in. However, the town obviously suffered from epidemics or violence, as this phase ends with numerous emergency burials, mostly without any offerings. They were found at two excavation sites (A/II and F/I) covering the period. This crisis may have been connected in some way to the rise of the 14th Dynasty regime, which seems to have split off from the state of the 13th Dynasty during the next phase (Phase F) of the town. It looks as if during that time a change in the social hierarchy also occurred. At its center,

FIGURE 3 A planned settlement of the early 12th Dynasty (plan D. Eigner in Czerny 1999, fig. 2).

bigger EL-LAHUN-style tripartite houses within large-size plots were established, with the smaller buildings on the same plots likely to have belonged to serfs (areas F/I, A/IV).

There is evidence of Canaanite cults. A cylinder seal of hematite with a representation of the North Syrian storm god Hadad/Ba'al Zephon dates from the 13th Dynasty and was cut locally (Figure 5). In the Eastern Town (A/II) a big Near Eastern broad-room temple was constructed, which grew soon afterward, in Phase E/3, into a formidable sacred precinct that is likely to date to the time of king Nehesy from the early 14th Dynasty (ca. 1720 BCE) (Figure 6). Two fragments of doorjambs of this king were found at this site, unfortunately in a secondary context; their date, however, would fit well with the sacred precinct – the only monumental architecture to which these door blocks could belong. The main temple (III) (with final dimensions of 32.5 × 21.5 m), with a fire-altar in front, was the first shrine to be built. As the nearest architectural parallels in Aleppo, Alalakh, and Hazor were devoted to the Syrian storm god, it is likely that he was also the titular divinity of this temple. On the

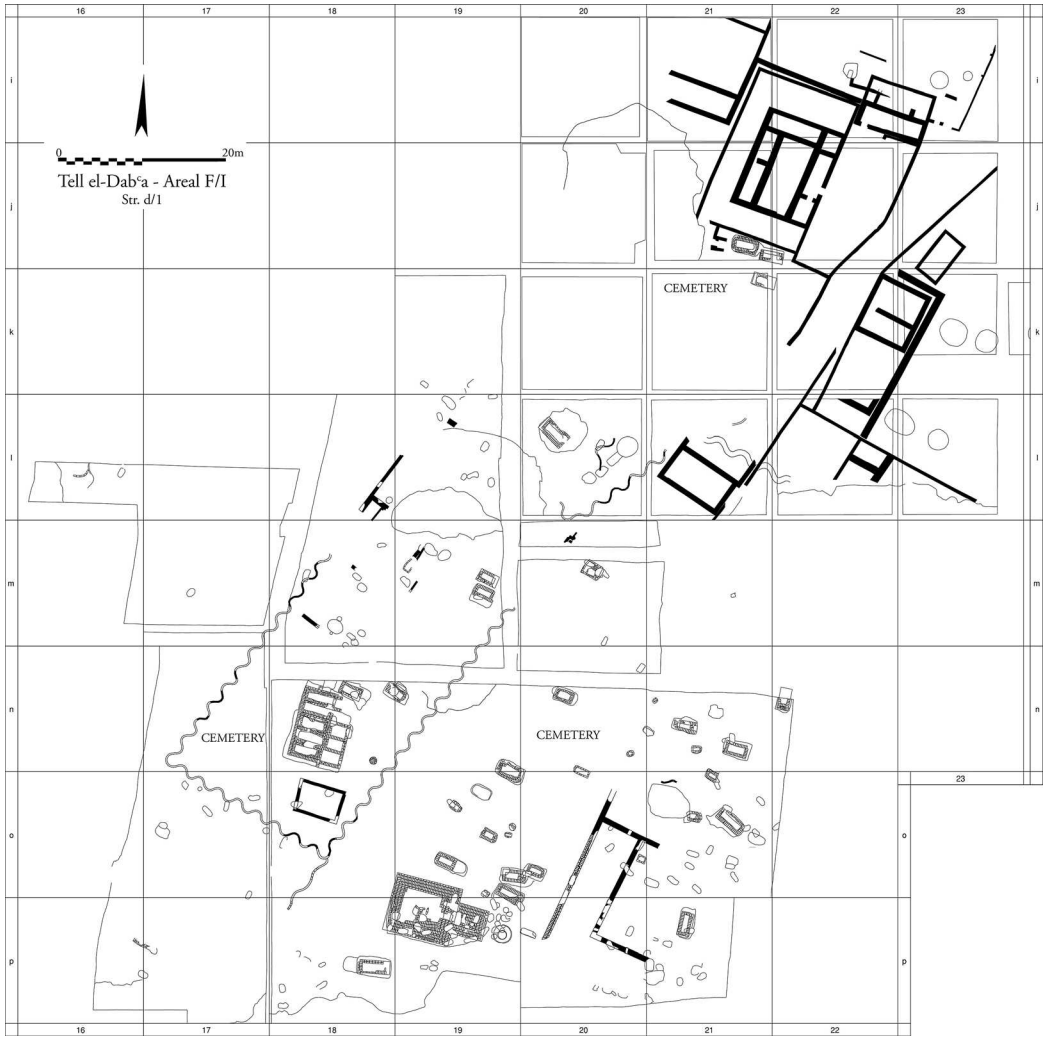

FIGURE 4a Earliest Canaanite settlement with Syrian middle-room, broad-room, and hearth-houses (after Bietak 1996, fig. 7).

west side of the forecourt of this temple was another Near Eastern shrine (II), a bent-axis temple with a tower for which the aforementioned altar also could have served. Acorns that had fallen on this altar can probably be associated with tree pits south of it, most probably belonging to oak trees. This could be taken as an indication that this temple was dedicated to Asherah – a Canaanite goddess associated, like the storm god, with the sea. This kind of cult could be expected in an important harbor town such as Avaris. Round pits containing pairs of sacrificed donkeys were found within the forecourt. North of the main temple III was a house, which, according to its deposits and finds, was used for ritual banqueting.

East of the main temple, and parallel to it, was another temple (V) with a tripartite shrine, typical of Egyptian temples. It was renewed in line with the level of activity at the main temple and was also given its own altar in its forecourt. Later, another forecourt with benches along its

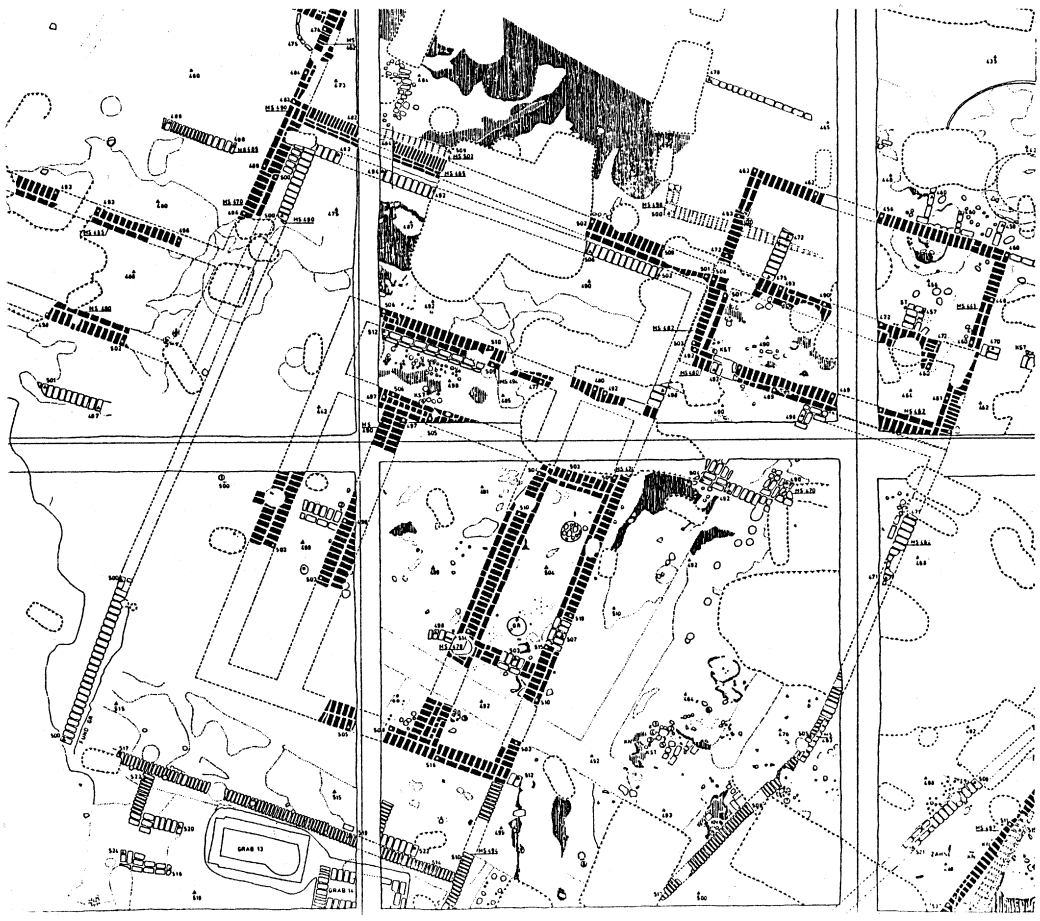

FIGURE 4b Detail of previous figure (after Bietak 1996, Figure 8).

northern enclosure was added. Both courts were littered with charred animal bones, mostly of cattle and caprids, and smashed pottery, obviously used for offerings and ritual repasts. The same evidence was also found in the front yard of the main temple. It is unclear whether this Egyptian temple V was dedicated to an Egyptian deity or was a funerary shrine, since other such shrines can be found within cemeteries west of the main temple precinct.

As it is situated side by side and parallel to the main temple (III) and also has a forecourt with an altar, the dedication to an Egyptian divinity with Near Eastern associations would make sense. One could think of Hathor, who is associated with the goddess Baʿalat (in the mines in Sinai or at Byblos), reflecting a syncretistic cult practice blending Egyptian with Near Eastern religion that seems to have developed. Temple V also has a small cemetery attached to its eastern side. Overall, the temple precinct seems to have served mainly funerary purposes, which may also explain the remains of repasts. In the Hyksos period, those rituals continued in front of temples III and V, evidencing the continuity of the temples until the end of this period, and even into the 18th Dynasty.

Tombs were arranged either in cemeteries around the temples or in a domestic setting. Besides pit burials, chamber tombs were

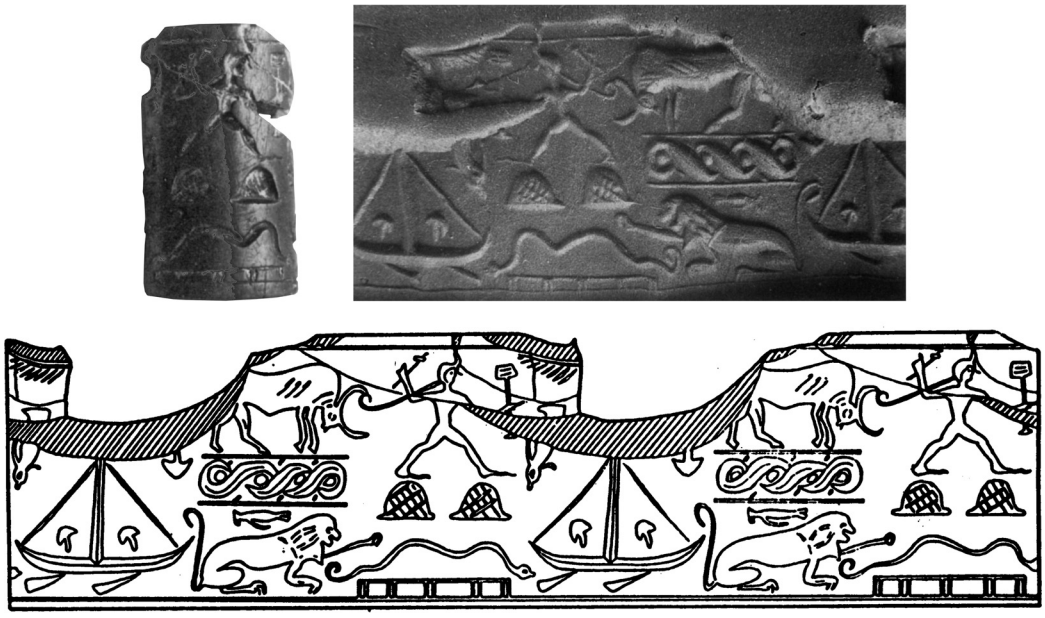

FIGURE 5 Cylinder seal of hematite, with a representation of the Syrian storm god as overlord of the sea (the snake Yam) and patron of sailors from the time of the 13th Dynasty at Tell el-Dab'a (C. Mlinar, after Bietak 1985, fig. 6).

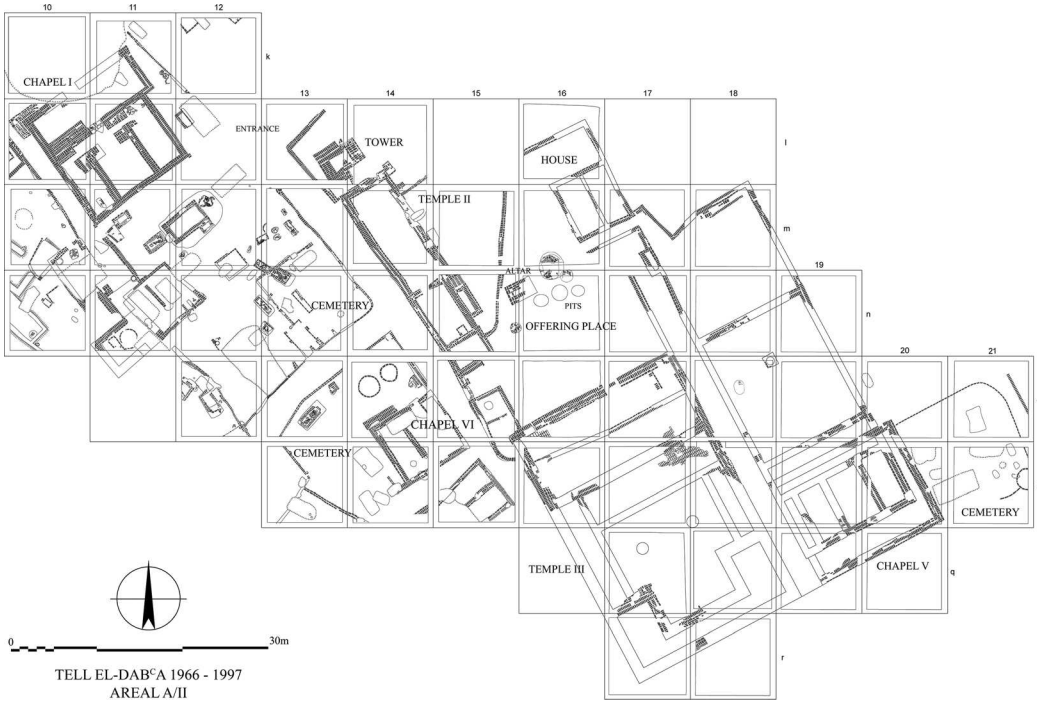

FIGURE 6 The Temple Precinct in Area A/II (after Bietak 2021, fig. 2).

covered by mud brick-vaults, in techniques that are partly Near Eastern, partly Egyptian. No mummification can be ascertained. The bodies were normally arranged in a supine or sideways position, with contracted legs. Higher-ranking tombs before the Hyksos period had wooden coffins. There is also a rare instance of a stone sarcophagus. Offerings consisted of weapons, such as daggers and axes of bronze, or pottery, such as juglets of Tell el-Yahudiya ware, bowls, cups, beer jars, and wine amphorae. Remains of meat offerings were often found near the face of the burials, placed on a bowl, including the ribs or legs of cattle, and, most commonly, portions of sheep or goat. In one case a whole piglet was deposited in a tomb chamber. Often the surviving bones show the effects of roasting. Children were normally buried in traditional Canaanite amphorae, despite the fact that Egyptian marl clay storage jars would have offered a much better protection against breakage.

Pairs of complete donkey and sheep/goat burials are thought to be connected to a tradition of long-distance caravans. The small stock may be considered to be mobile food provisions and reveal ancient Near Eastern burial customs. Exclusively in Phase F are female-attendant burials, placed across the entrance of, or beside, the tomb chamber. Parallels have thus far been found only at Tell Arbid in the Khabur area in northernmost Syria. Pits with model pottery are a frequent feature, as replenishments for the demands of the dead sometime after the burial.

Besides the Near Eastern temples, a Near Eastern type of palace of ca. 10,600 m^2 was built for the kings of the 14th Dynasty in Phase F; this ended in a conflagration in Phase E/2 (Figure 7). This circumstance can be best explained as connected with the installation of the 15th Dynasty – the Hyksos. Within the burned magazines was found the imprint of a

FIGURE 7 A Near-Eastern type of palace of the 15th Dynasty at Tell el-Dab'a; this shares features with the contemporary Palace Q at Ebla (© Manfred Bietak and the archives of the Austrian Archaeological Institute and courtesy Paolo Matthiae, Ebla Archives).

seal belonging to the green jasper workshop located by Dominique Collon at Byblos. It was applied to a papyrus and bore the inscription of a "Ruler of Retjenu" with the Byblite name *Ipy-šmw*, reminiscent of the name of the Byblite prince *Ipi-šmw-Ibi*. The title had previously been found on a scarab of Phase G/4 of the early 13th Dynasty, already discussed above.

The cemeteries and their chapels attached to this particular temple precinct were soon overbuilt by settlements – a sign of growing demand for land in the course of the Hyksos period. Ultimately, the original plots were completely filled, leaving little space for courtyards. Tombs were often planned within the ground floor of houses. The reason for this trend was a town enclosure wall, parts of which were excavated at 'Ezbet Helmy; another part was discovered by geophysical surveying north of Tell el-Dab'a. South of the Tell this survey found the enclosure wall again. Areas outside the enclosure, such as the northeastern suburb at H/V, were distributed on a larger scale, more appropriate for settlement. Within the settlement history of Tell el-Dab'a, houses of a size ranging between 27 m^2 and 950 m^2 exhibit the same variability as those at the later site of Tell el-'Amarna (*see* AMARNA).

The beginning of Hyksos rule is accompanied by many changes. The building material changed in all parts of the town, insofar as they have been investigated, from sand brick to the more water-resistant mud brick. The town grew from ca. 240 to 620 acres. The influx of population that caused this increase seems to originate, according to their material culture, from within Egypt. A good part of the new population may have come from the region between Memphis and the Fayum, where areas inhabited by a population of Western Asiatic origin were seemingly abandoned just as the population of Avaris began to increase. According to strontium isotope analyses, however, a fair number of the population had been born outside the Nile Valley. This conflicting evidence could be explained by the relatively small number of samples which are thus far available.

While the big temple III stayed intact, the second Canaanite bent-axis temple (temple II) was overbuilt by domestic building. This also happened to the cemeteries surrounding the sacred precinct. A new large temple (VI), which seems to be Egyptian in style, was constructed in the center of the town. The cultic practices connected to this temple were, however, Near Eastern. While in the 14th Dynasty the remains of sacrifices – charred animal bones and broken pottery – remained scattered in the forecourts of the temples, in the course of the Hyksos period the offering refuse was buried in circular pits within these forecourts. As in the 14th Dynasty, the Hyksos period sacrificial animals were cattle, sheep, and goats. Pig bones, although not rare in settlement refuse, were largely absent. It seems that a kind of pork-taboo for ritual purposes had already been established among the Canaanites living in Egypt. Indeed, new eating habits may have been introduced from the Hyksos period onward. An increase of abrasion and a decrease of dental caries can be seen in comparison to the pre-Hyksos population.

Other innovations during Hyksos rule include a more standardized ceramic production, almost exclusively in local workshops; imports drop to only some 4 percent of the whole ceramic corpus and were restricted to amphorae. On the other hand, imports from Cyprus rose steadily, which may have gone hand in hand with the import of copper. Tin was seemingly no longer available, as the metal tools and weapons were all made of copper. Finally, even copper itself was scarce, to judge from its disappearance from offerings in burials.

Another noticeable change under the Hyksos was the building of a new palace, built on top of the burned palace of the 14th Dynasty near the center of the town, southwest of the older mansions of Phase F–E/2. Its size can be estimated to ca. 10,600m^2. According to finds of seal impressions, it is most likely that one of its occupants was the Hyksos Khayan (Phase E/1–D/3).

According to geophysical survey, the building was connected by a ceremonial road to the aforementioned new temple precinct (VI) in the north, in area F/I. The palace, as far as excavated, does not conform to Egyptian palace-plans; rather, with its compact layout and add-on modules, its design appears to follow Syrian and Mesopotamian models. Buildings and courtyards were erected in successive blocks of two rows of three units each.

The entrance to the palace via a gate with two projecting doorjambs, leading via a small plaza to a second gate, and to a bigger courtyard, is very similar to the contemporary palace of Mari and other Near Eastern palaces. In front of the façade, a series of rooms were secondarily attached, which were erected together with a Near-Eastern type of broad-room temple with a series of four columns, facing at a right angle to the palace forecourt. A throne room was found in the northeastern section of the palace just behind the northeastern front of the palace. The main unit seems to have been Block A, where double-filled walls in the southwest and the southeast enclose two rows of magazines; the southern row was roofed by vaults, and the northern row probably featured flat roofs only.

In the magazines, the remains of Levantine amphorae and numerous stoppers of mud were found. In the vestibule leading to the magazines, the burial of a horse, dating to the time of the palace, was found. It was probably an animal held in high esteem by the patron. A wide ramp from the northwest and attached to the southwest of Block A led to a staircase tower at the southeastern corner of the building block. This tower, resting on a brick platform of ca. 20 × 20 m, served as an interface between different parts of the palace and created a link to Block B. It seems to have incorporated a direct flight of stairs from the big courtyard C in the eastern part of the palace enclosure to the upper floor of Block A. A block of four chambers with antechambers which look like shafts to tombs were added to the southwest, but they were more probably magazines for grain which were filled up from above (Block E). A staircase seems to have been attached to the northwest of this block. South of Block A, a big unit of more magazines was built (Block G).

At a later phase, the predominant and regular magazine Block G was abandoned and was subsequently cut by a new southeastern enclosure wall of Block B. Originally this Block B was attached to these magazines. Finally, a precinct of 58–63 × 29 m with the staircase tower at its northwestern corner was formed. The southern part of Block B consisted of a courtyard, which was enclosed to its northwest and southwest by double-filled walls in a casemate system. It was added in a later extension of the palace and was spacious (27 × 21 m). It may have replaced a simple enclosure wall of this courtyard.

Along the northeastern and southeastern enclosures and across its midst were found benches and a series of large offering pits filled with thousands of broken vessels, such as cups, plates, beer jars, amphorae, and ritual pottery such as footed bowls, fish vessels (some of them featuring beautiful narrative designs), and rhyta in the shape of birds and hippopotami; one was in the shape of a nude woman. A limited amount of Middle Nubian pottery, not attributable to a specific culture, was also found in these pits. In all, more than six thousand vessels that seem to originate from ritual repasts were retrieved; these suggest a ritual function for the courtyard similar to the *marzihu* in the ancient Near East.

The courtyard in the south, with double-filled walls, stair towers jutting out of the southwestern façade, and a platform or a pillar in the midst of the southeastern court wall, can be found in the contemporary palace Q of Ebla. The pillar or platform is also attested in the central courtyard of the Old Assyrian Palace at Assur. The arrangement of magazines parallels those of the palace of Qatna.

In its final stage, a rectangular groundwater well was added to the palace, accessible via a dromos with stairs. In the filling of this well, a fragment of a Babylonian cuneiform letter shows that the Hyksos, 150 years before Amarna, were already engaged in long-distance letter diplomacy. A basalt lion of Khayan, found in Baghdad in the

nineteenth century, may be in some way connected with this find. That not only letters, but also commodities, were exchanged can be shown by the finds of Old Babylonian cuneiform seal impressions from other sites at Tell el-Dabʿa.

Along the northwestern enclosure wall of the forecourt of the Hyksos palace, three pits containing chopped-off right hands were found. Two adjoining pits contained altogether fourteen right hands, and one pit a single right hand, which could be tied to the stratigraphy of the palace. Chopping off the right hand of enemies to prove the number of killed foes is known from inscriptions and representations from the beginning of the New Kingdom from pharaoh Ahmose I onwards. It is the first archaeological evidence of this gruesome custom, which seems to have been introduced by the Hyksos. As a throne room was accommodated at the northern front of the palace, it is possible that an award such as the later known "gold of valor" was bestowed on the trophy bringers, probably from a forerunner of the window of appearances found in New Kingdom royal palaces.

In the late Hyksos period (Phase D/2), another palace was constructed further west in the town, adjacent to the easternmost branch of the Nile. Behind a buttressed enclosure wall, which seems to have been part of the town wall, was a garden with trees – perhaps identical to the famous gardens of Apophis on the Second Kamose Stela. South of it was a second enclosure, incorporating satellite buildings and a water-supply system made of limestone. The actual palace seems to have been largely destroyed by the digging of the El-Samaʿana (El-Didamun) canal and the asphalt road to Tanis. Stone blocks with royal inscriptions of Khayan, Yanassi, Apophis, and Tany were extracted from the canal during the annual dredging work carried out by the Egyptian irrigation authorities. A monumental doorjamb of the hitherto unknown Hyksos Sekerher was found nearby, having been reused for a Tuthmosid palace at ʿEzbet Helmy.

After the conquest of Avaris by the Thebans, most of the town was abandoned, although continuity is observable in the temple precinct presumably dedicated to the storm god (later the precinct of the temple of SETH), and in the Western Town at the easternmost Nile branch (area H/VI). Ceramic production of the typical Eastern Delta hybrid style, which had been developed in the Hyksos period, also continued unbroken. This is a sign that the Levantine population living in Avaris was not actually expelled but carried on living there in smaller numbers, as subjects of the 18th Dynasty. The other people were probably sent all over the country as serfs and temple slaves.

Activities of the 18th Dynasty were concentrated on the western part of Avaris. Large numbers of silos and magazines are evidence of grain stockpiling (Phase D/1). Soon afterward, camps with open fireplaces and ovens were erected. Along with burials of young men between the ages of eighteen and forty, and the burial of horses and mules, these are indications of military facilities being established. Kerma pottery and anthropological assessments of graves indicate that Nubians were among the interred. Perhaps they were former prisoners of war, pressed into service in the Egyptian army during the wars with the Kingdom of KUSH. There are also graves of a number of males, who seem to have been executed. This is based on the existence of multiple burials, mostly with two individuals placed on their stomachs in the tête-bêche position; one skeleton has its head missing. At the bottom of a circular pit, two individuals were found in this kind of burial posture. On top of them were heaped more than 300 broken pots and limestone fragments. Four individuals were crammed into another pit in unnatural positions. The bad state of preservation of the bones prevented the identification of any trauma connected with the individuals' death.

These camps and burial grounds were followed soon afterward, during the age of the Thutmosid kings and most likely dating to Thutmose III, by the construction of a huge 13-acre palace precinct (Figure 8). This contained three palaces on platforms, accessible by ramps, and a big public building, as well as magazines and workshops (Figure 9). Two of the palaces (F and G) were furnished with,

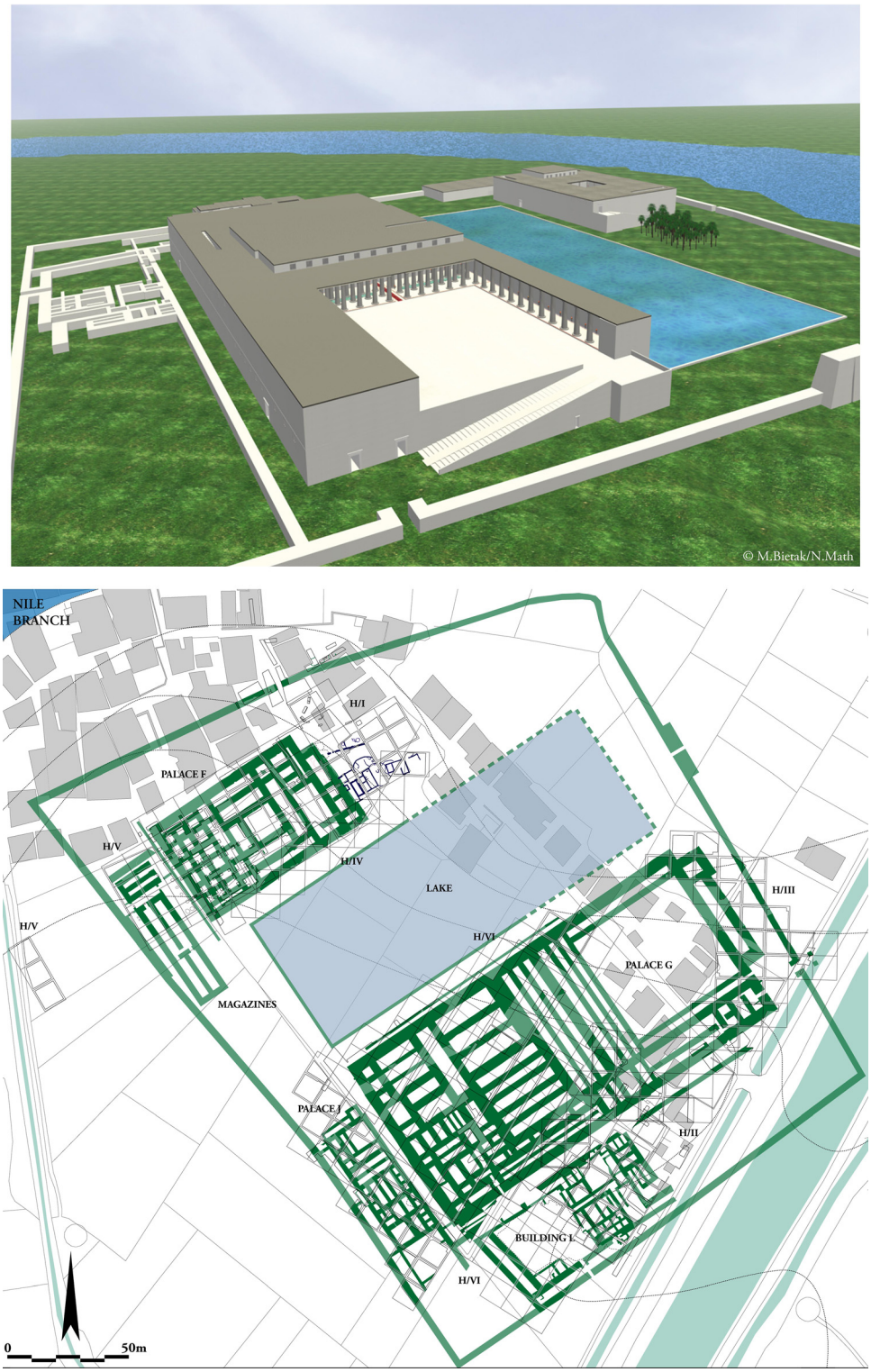

FIGURE 8 The Thutmosid palace precinct at the western edge of former Avaris, most likely forming part of the naval port Peru-nefer (after Bietak 2018a, fig. 4).

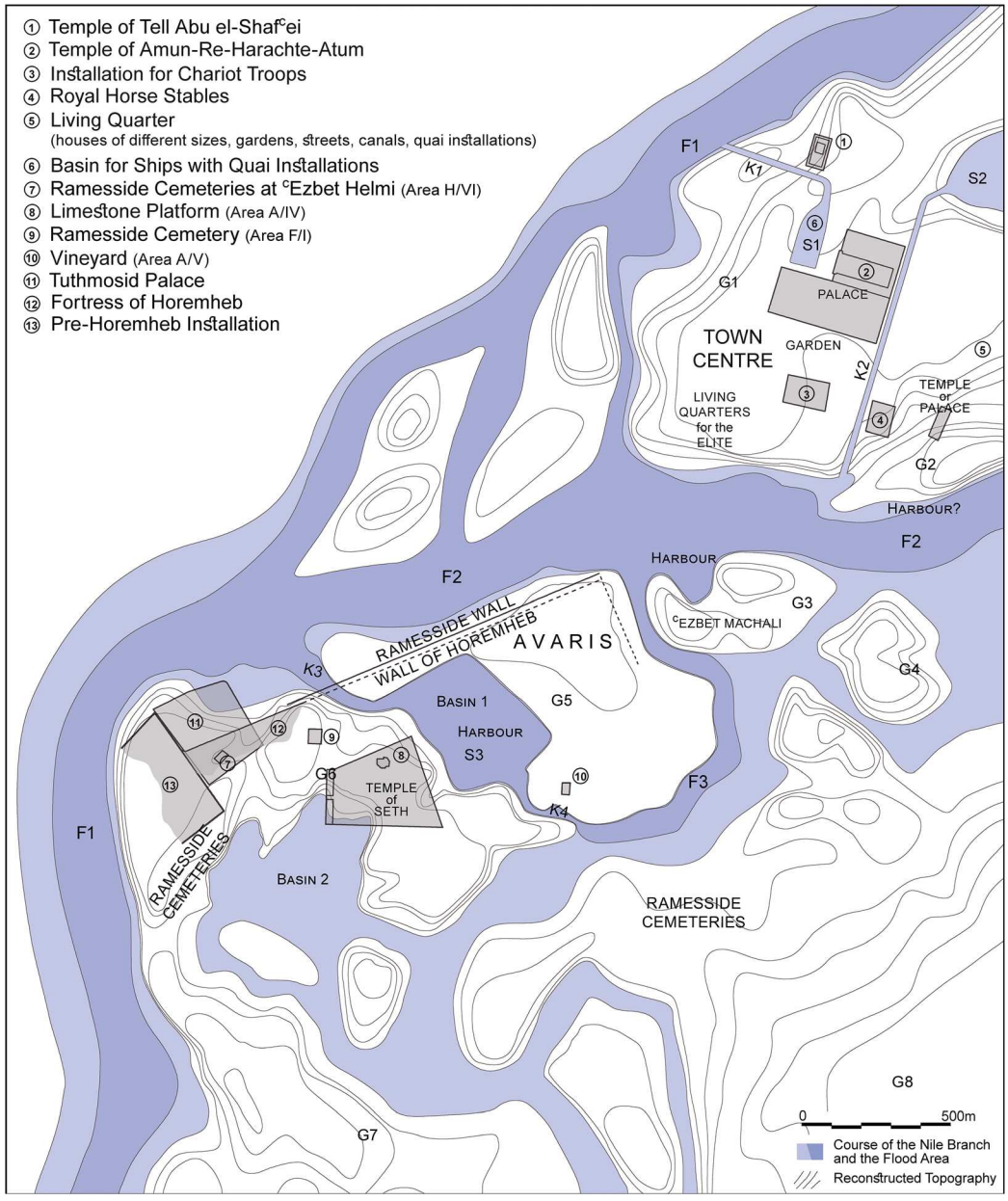

FIGURE 9 Avaris and Piramesse in the time of Horemheb and the 19th Dynasty (after Bietak in Bietak et al. 2010, fig. 4).

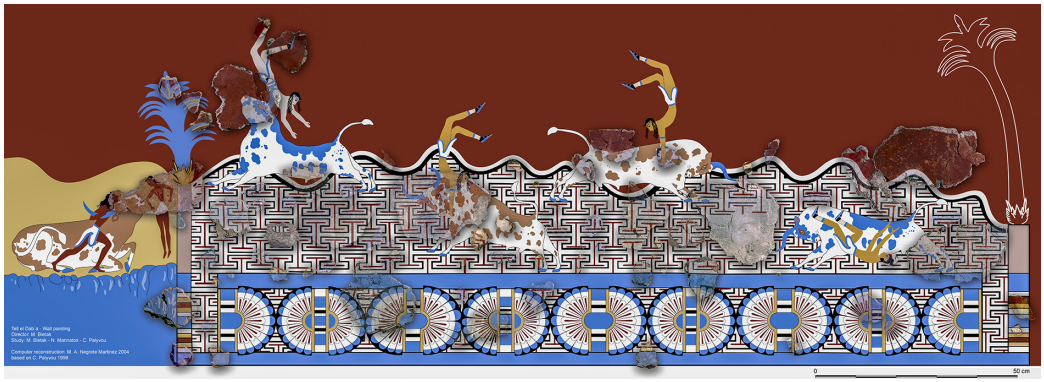

FIGURE 10 Minoan paintings from the Thutmosid Palace F at Tell el-Dab'a, showing bull-grappling and bull-leaping, against the backdrop of a maze pattern. At the bottom is a frieze with half-rosettes, known to be an emblem of the Palace of Knossos (after Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2010, fig. 59).

according to Nanno Marinatos and Lyvia Morgan, original Minoan wall paintings, including the emblem of the Palace of Knossos in the form of a half-rosette frieze. The technology, the style, the iconography, the color conventions, and the motifs, such as bull-leaping, bull-grappling, and hunting scenes (Figure 10), also add to the identification of these paintings as the works of Minoan master painters (see PERU-NEFER).

This precinct, together with the harbor basin and the temple of Seth/Baal, can most probably be identified as parts of the naval base of Peru-nefer. The fact that the northern strip of the harbor basin was already silted up and used from the late Middle Kingdom onward for buildings does not contradict this identification, as until now only a very small part of this enormous basin has been investigated, and that Avaris and later Piramesse had a big harbor is well known from texts (Kamose Stela II, 13-15, and Papyrus Anastasi III, 7.5-6).

The site was abandoned after the reign of Amenhotep II but resettled by Horemheb, who constructed a huge fortress with buttresses encompassing the harbor. This is the time when the toponym Peru-nefer appears again after being absent since the reign of Amenhotep II. Horemheb also reconstructed the temple of Seth, thereby laying the foundation for PIRAMESSE, which became the main royal residence during the 19th Dynasty. From this phase of Avaris, only the enclosure wall, magazines, and tree pits of the temple of Seth are preserved. In front of its pylons stood once the famous 400 Years Stela of Rameses II, purporting to demonstrate a continuity of the cult of Seth as the Egyptian form of the Syrian storm god as the "Father of the Fathers" of the 19th Dynasty. This gave this dynasty of non-royal ancestry legitimacy for their kingship.

Major parts of Avaris served as a location for the cemeteries of Piramesse during the Ramesside period. The tombs have been largely stripped bare and destroyed by agricultural activity during the past hundred years. After a long hiatus, the site shows traces of a large settlement from the Saitic until the Ptolemaic period, with remains of tower-houses and a temple.

SEE ALSO: Amenemhat I–VII; Amenhotep (Amenophis) I–III; Horemheb; Senwosret (Sesostris) I–IV.

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