The Unexpected Origin of the People Behind Hyksos Rule in Egypt

Manfred Bietak

Austrian Academy of Sciences
Austrian Archaeological Institute
Dr. Ignaz Seipel–Platz 2
1010 Vienna/Austria
Manfred.bietak@univie.ac.at

Abstract
The palace attributed to the 14th Dynasty in Avaris (Tell el–Dab‘a), the capital of the Hyksos, shows powerful signs of conflagration. Violence and political turmoil appear to have accompanied the transition to the 15th Dynasty. While the 14th Dynasty, marked by its sacred and palatial architecture, shows strong ties to northernmost Syria and northern Mesopotamia, the new dynasty, on the other hand, displays more Egyptian features.
The 15th Dynasty replaced the large Near Eastern bent–axis temple with a small, insignificant shrine and built a new Egyptian–style temple precinct in an area closer to the new Hyksos palace. Only the major broad–room temple, likely devoted to the storm god, remained in use. Offering practices altered, accompanied by a dramatic change in the material culture, notably in ceramic and scarab production. Moreover, a noticeable decline in ceramic imports from the Levant occurred, and an examination of metal objects revealed the absence of tin.
The town’s expansion, from c. 100 to 250 ha, and the more densely developed settlement structure show a significant population influx linked to the Hyksos takeover. These changes, however, do not reveal a fresh wave of immigrants from the Levant, but of settlers of Asiatic origin predominantly from another area within Egypt. Strong indications suggest that these people may have come from the Memphite/Fayum region, where both written and material evidence attests to the presence of Asiatic communities living in enclosed settlements – the wn.wt – near the residence of Itjy–tawy.

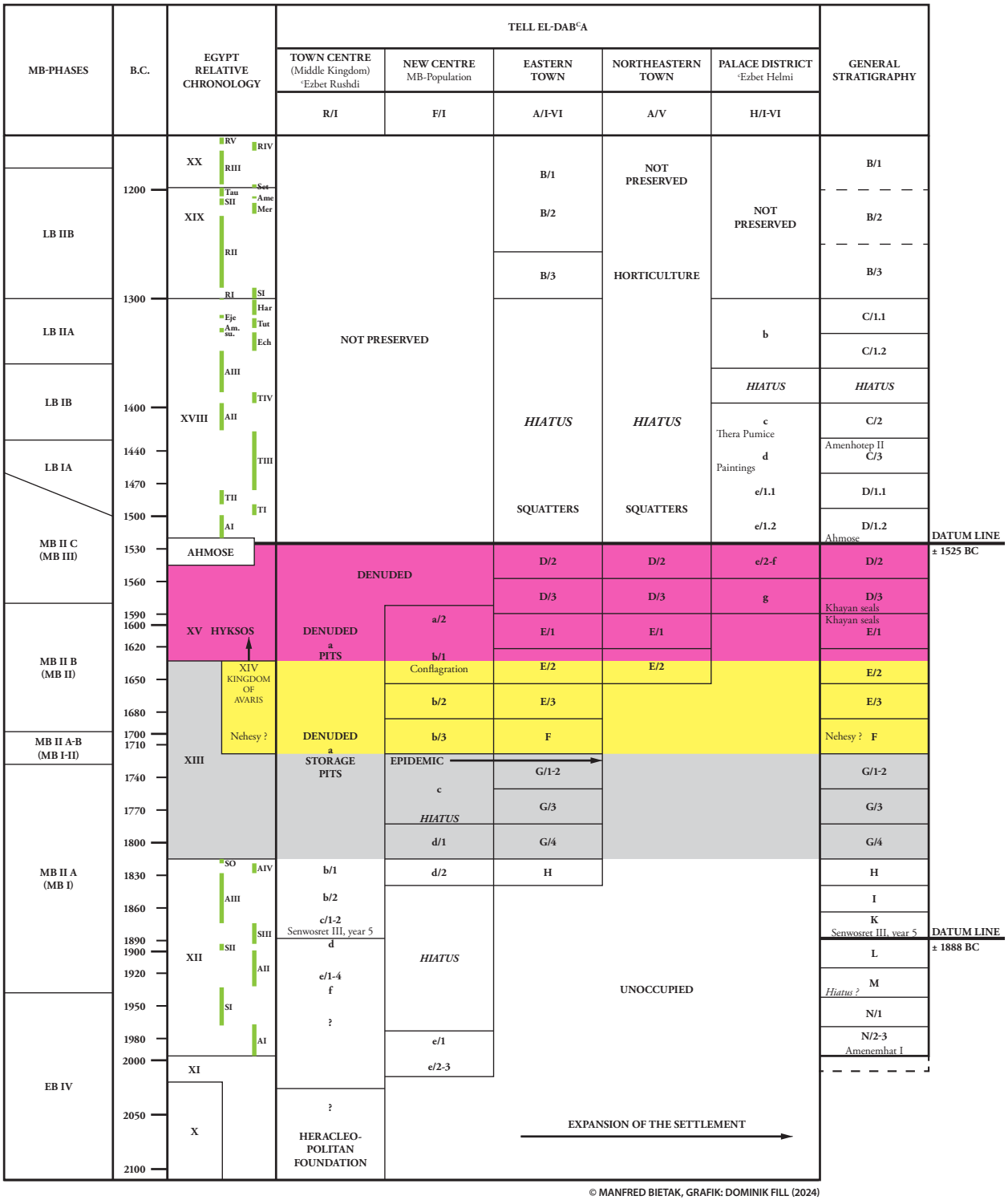


Fig. 1 Stratigraphy and chronology of Tell el-Dab'a (© M. Bietak 2022: fig.1)

I. Introduction

At the outset, within the scope of the research objectives of the ERC Advanced Grant "The Enigma of the Hyksos" (2015–2021), the question of origin was tied to the immigration of a Western Asiatic population to Tell el–Dab'a and other sites in the eastern Nile Delta. Yet, without the discovery of royal tombs, the question of the origin of the ruling Hyksos Dynasty is difficult to answer. Consequently, attention turns to the origin of their people—the inhabitants of Tell el–Dab'a. However, an investigation into the differentiation between the inhabitants of the 14th and 15th Dynasties has been absent thus far, primarily due to the assumption that the people referred to as the Hyksos originated from the earlier stock. The conflagration that consumed the palace attributed to the 14th Dynasty, however, shows that dynastic change (from 14th to 15th) may not have occurred peacefully. The substantial expansion of the town during the early Hyksos Period equally attests to a significant influx of new people, prompting the question of their origins.

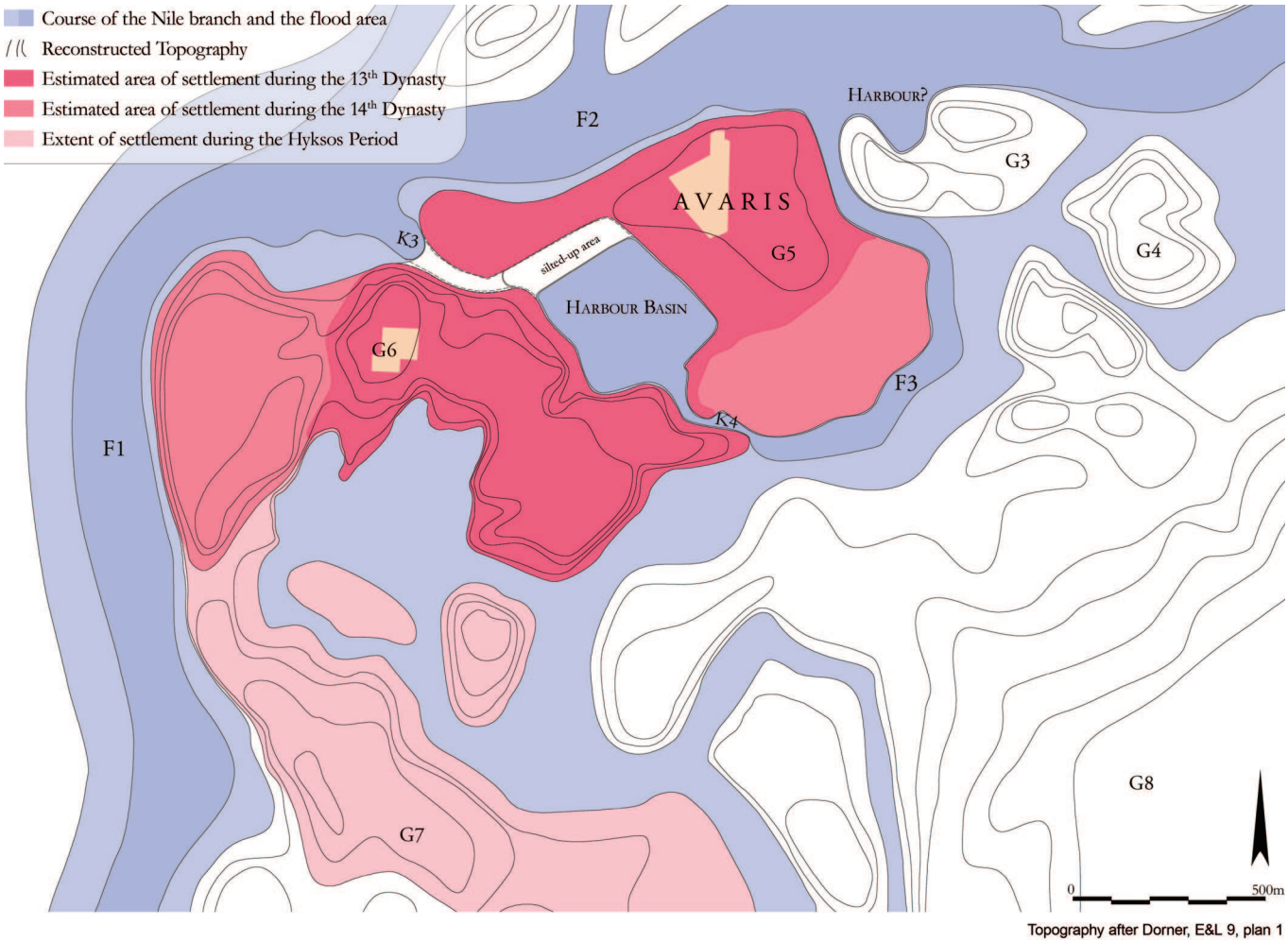


Fig. 2 Development of Avaris from the Middle Kingdom to the end of the Hyksos Period (after Bietak 2010a: figs. 9b-c)

According to Tell el–Dab'a's archaeological record, the site originated from two planned Egyptian settlements **(Fig. 1-2)**. One settlement, at the F/I site in Tell el–Dab'a, began life at the dawn of the 12th Dynasty, or perhaps even in the late 11th Dynasty (Czerny 1999). This settlement, most likely, gave way during the reign of Amenemhat II to another planned settlement comprising uniform houses surrounded by a town wall at 'Ezbet Rushdi, just south of a deviation of the easternmost branch of the Nile (Bietak & Dorner 1998; Czerny 2015). Under Senwosret III, this settlement was endowed with a ka–temple dedicated to the founder of the 12th Dynasty, king Amenemhat I (Bietak & Dorner 1998; Czerny 2015). The economic background of these settlements appears to have been a harbour basin **(Fig. 2)**, which secured year–round shelter from and access to the Mediterranean, except for the stormy winter months (January and February).[1] This harbour basin could have served as the launching point for maritime expeditions during the reign of Amenemhat II (Altenmüller & Moussa 1991; Altenmüller 2015).

II. The Rulers of Retjenu

During the late 12th Dynasty, a Western Asiatic population settled around the enclosure walls of the Middle Kingdom town of 'Ezbet Rushdy, where the Egyptian population continued to live until the end of the Hyksos Period (Bietak 2016b; Bietak 2018). These newcomers introduced aspects of Near Eastern domestic architecture, including the Syrian middle–room house and the broad–room house **(Fig. 3)** (Bietak 1984b: 324–325, fig. 3; Eigner 1986: 19–25, fig. 1; Bietak 1996a: figs 7–8; Bietak 1997: 88–99, fig. 4.10).

An example of the former type of house may have belonged to a dignitary who was interred in a large domed mudbrick chamber with a chapel as a superstructure (Schiestl 2009: fig. 217–224, pl. IV/a–b).

[1] The regime of the Nile made navigation very difficult if not impossible during spring (March until June) when the Nile reduced its water volume to about one fifth (Le Père 1822: 140–141; Clot 1840: 495; Bietak 2010a: 19–21; Bietak 2010d: 165–169; Cooper 2012: 25–27; Cooper 2014: 111–117; Somaglino 2015:141–148; Bietak 2017: 56). For information about the cessation of sea navigation during January and February, see Porten & Yardeni 1993: C 3.7; Yardeni 1994: 69.

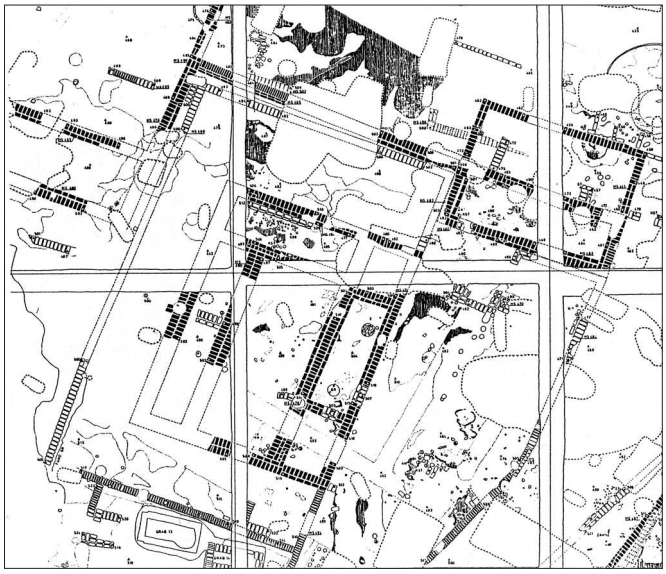


Fig. 3 Syrian middle-room house and a broad-room house in a domestic area of Phase H in Tell el-Dab'a (late 12th Dynasty) (after Bietak 1996: Fig. 7)

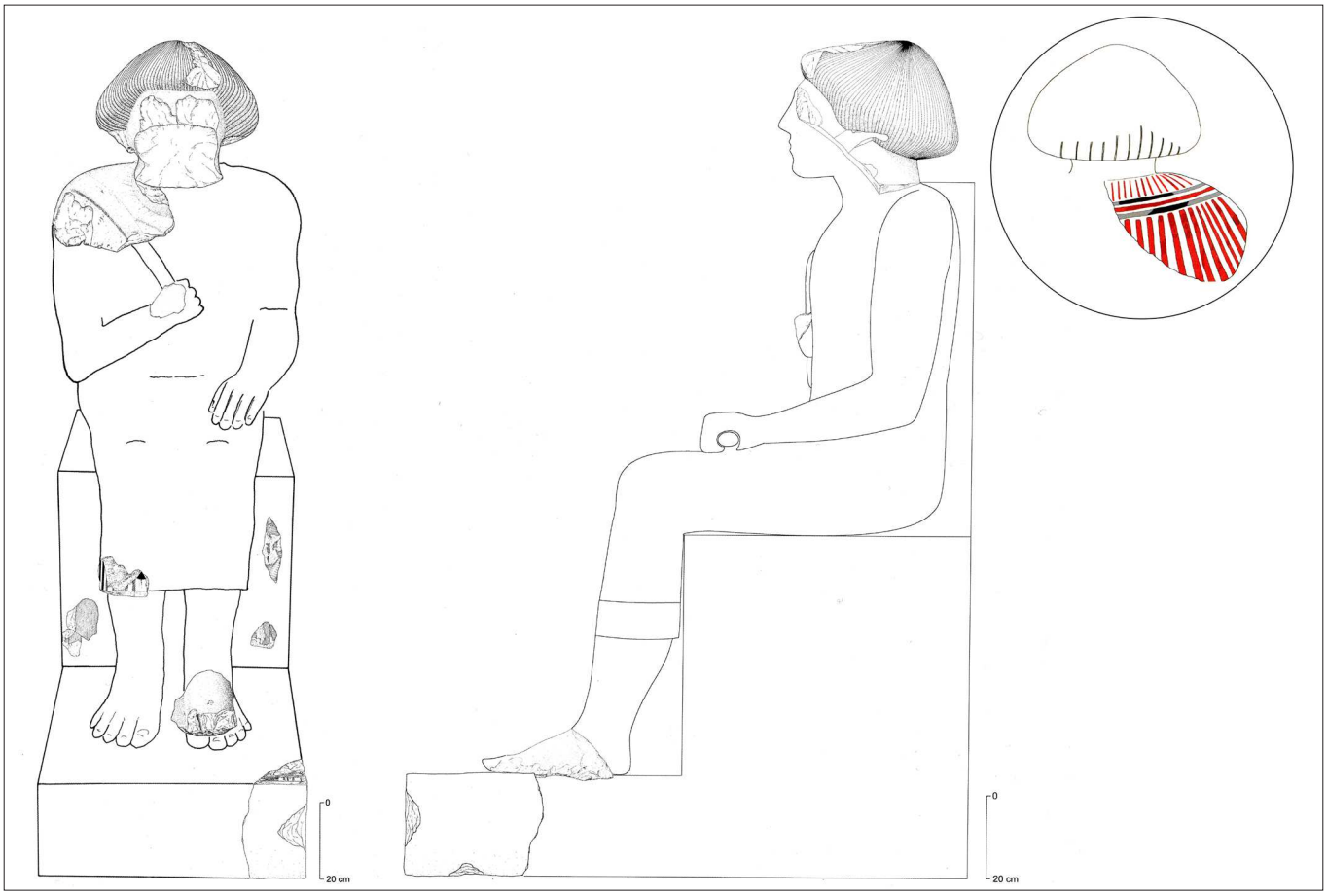


Fig. 4 Statue of a Western Asiatic dignitary broken into pieces, dating to the late 12th Dynasty (after Schiestl 2009: figs. 44-45)

Inside, the head of an oversized limestone sculpture of an Asiatic dignitary was discovered sporting a mushroom–shaped coiffure and a multi–coloured plissé tunic **(Fig. 4)** (Bietak 1991c: fig. 10, pls. 16–17; Bietak 1996a: 29, fig. 17 pl. 4; Bietak & Hein 1994: 112; Schiestl 2006: 324–325, fig. 3; Schiestl 2009: 77–89, figs. 44–47, 228, pl. XIVb). Additional fragments of this sculpture were found at a distance from the main find spot. Another similar statue's head (Munich ÄS 7171), likely originating from Tell el–Dab'a **(Fig. 5)**, surfaced on the antiquities market (Wildung 2000: 186 [83]; Do. Arnold 2010: 191–196, pl. 28–30). According to Dietrich Wildung, it dates to the 13th Dynasty and appears to have been found by farmers preparing their land for cultivation. This statue might have come from a tomb chapel belonging to a palatial 13th Dynasty mansion.

Fig. 5 Head of a Western Asiatic dignitary, most probably originating from Tell el-Dab'a, dating to the early 13th Dynasty (courtesy Museum für Ägyptische Kunst Munich, Marianne Franke)

Comparative analysis with contemporaneous statues in Syria (Bietak 1994) and New Kingdom representations reveals that both these sculptures are of high–quality Egyptian craftsmanship, representing the iconography of high–status Syrian princes. These statues differ from the representations of other high–status Asiatics, such as the caravan leader depicted in the tomb of Khnumhotep II in Beni Hassan. The question remains, however, as to why these oversized statues of Syrian dignitaries were found in Egypt?

The statues were crafted by highly skilled sculptors, most likely working in the Memphite royal workshops. Deliberate blows were directed at the face of the statue found at Tell el–Dab'a, intentionally obliterating it. Similarly, the Munich statue exhibits damage to its facial area. This kind of intentional destructions resembles a concept known as "damnatio memoriae", a politically driven act of erasure. This begs the question: who exactly were these princely dignitaries depicted in the statues?

Within a tomb of the aforementioned early 13th Dynasty palatial mansion, an amethyst scarab **(Fig. 6)** was found mounted on a gold ring (Bietak 1991c: 67, fig. 15, pl. 22/A–B; Martin 1998; Schiestl 2009: fig. 48/1; Kopetzky & Bietak 2016: 371, fig. 16). The title of a *[ḥqꜣ] n Rṯnw dj Sbk–m–ḥꜣt* "[Ruler of] Retjenu (Di) Sobekemhat" (according to Martin 1998) was incised on the seal face. The same title also appears on a seal impression (Kopetzky & Bietak 2016: 359–363, fig. 3: TD 9402H; Bietak 2022: fig. 10) from the so–called "Green Jasper Workshop" (Collon 1986; Collon 2001) **(Fig. 7)**. The owner had the title *ḥqꜣ n Rṯnw ꜥꜣ wrw nw wrw* "the ruler of Retjenu, the highest of the greatest of the princes" whose name *Ipy–šmw* recalls the name of *ḥꜣty–ꜥ n Kpn Ipy–šmw–Iby* "the governor/ruler of Byblos Ipy–shemu–iby," buried in Royal Tomb II at this site. The title *ꜥꜣ–wrw nw wrw* is reminiscent of the Byblite title *ḥqꜣ ḥqꜣw*.[2]

In a separate instance, a seal impression on an amphora handle containing a child burial was found in Phase D/3 (Hyksos Period) at Tell el–Dab'a. It contained the title and name *ḥꜣtj–ꜥ šmw* "the governor (of Byblos) Shemu" (Bietak 1996a: pl. 25A; Forstner–Müller 2008: 306–307, fig. 227).[3] In the Levant, this title was exclusive to the rulers of Byblos, from the late Middle Kingdom onwards. It is worth noting that the seal impression from the "Green Jasper Workshop", localised in Byblos by Dominique Collon, is of particular interest due to its use of Egyptian alluvial clay for the bulla.[4]

[2] For this title, see Flammini 2011/12: 57–59.

[3] The clay of this amphora comes from northern Lebanon, as indicated by the petrographic analysis of Cohen–Weinberger & Goren 2004: 84, n. 18.

[4] Identification by Karin Kopetzky.

Fig. 6 Amethyst scarab mounted on a gold ring from a tomb of Phase G/4, south of a mansion of the early 13th Dynasty. It mentions a "Ruler of Retjenu (Di) Sobekemhat" (after Bietak 1991c: pl. 22A-B)

Fig. 7 Impression of a seal of the "Green Jasper Workshop" of a ruler of Retjenu with the name "Ipy–shemu" suggesting a relationship to the Ruler of Byblos "Ipy–shemu–iby," owner of the royal Tomb II in Byblos (after Kopetzky & Bietak 2016a: fig. 3)

The onomastic evidence discussed above makes it highly likely that this "Ruler of Retjenu" is a kinsman of the rulers of Byblos. However, the geographical extent of Retjenu is vast, stretching from the region of Sichem in northern Palestine (also called Samaria) to the north of Lebanon.[5] This area is too expansive to be governed by a single ruler. Hence, I propose that the title "Ruler of Retjenu" was an honorary designation bestowed by the Egyptian crown to a high dignitary originating from the northern Levant, specifically Byblos. This dignitary likely lived in Tell el–Dab'a / Avaris – a town largely inhabited by Western Asiatic people (Kopetzky & Bietak 2016: 370–372).

Unfortunately, we can only guess at his occupation. It is possible that his office included organising trading expeditions to the Levant and possibly also to the mines in Sinai on behalf of the Egyptian crown. During the reign of Amenemhat III, there is evidence that the "Brother of the Ruler of Retjenu" accompanied Egyptian expeditions to the Sinai (Černý 1935; Gardiner et al. 1952: stelae 87, 103, 112, 115, 405). He is depicted on four stelae as a Canaanite dignitary sporting a mushroom–shaped coiffure, holding a duckbill axe and riding a donkey led by two acolytes (Goldwasser 2012/2013: figs 1–3, 10, 15–18). One stela portrays him as an Egyptian official (Gardiner et al. 1952: pl. XXIV; Goldwasser 2012/2013: 357, fig. 10), indicating his role within the Egyptian service and his responsibility for overseeing the expedition from start to finish.

Where there exists a "Brother of the Ruler of Retjenu", it logically follows that a "Ruler of Retjenu" must also be present. This brings us back to the limestone statues of Asiatic dignitaries found in Tell el–Dab'a, which, with some likelihood, may represent these dignitaries (Figs. 4–5). Returning to the seals bearing the title "Ruler of Retjenu", we find that during the late 12th Dynasty, they seem to have lived in the abovementioned Syrian middle–room house (Fig. 3). By the early 13th Dynasty, they transitioned to a palatial mansion **(Fig. 8)**, and by the 14th Dynasty they lived in a substantial palace measuring 10,500 sq. m in size (Bietak 2010b; Bietak 2010c; Bietak & Forstner–Müller 2009: 108–112; Bietak et al. 2012/2013: 32–44).[6]

It is plausible that these structures—the late 12th Dynasty middle–room house, the early 13th Dynasty mansion, and the palace—served dignitaries holding the title of "Ruler of Retjenu". This connection implies a semantic relationship to "Ruler of the hill countries". Given the royal dimensions of the palace, a question emerges: could the kings of the 14th Dynasty have originated from the line of "Rulers of Retjenu" spanning the late 12th and 14th Dynasties (Bietak 2022)? The general consensus now leans towards Avaris, not Xois, as the residence of the 14th Dynasty (Redford 1970: 21–22). Moreover, on onomastic grounds, the 14th Dynasty is understood to have Western Asiatic origins (Redford 1992: 20–21, 106–7; Ryholt 1997: 99–102, 126–130; Schneider 1998: 31–49).

King Neḥesy, who according to the Turin Papyrus should be placed near the start of the 14th Dynasty,[7] appears to have introduced the cult of the northern Syrian storm god in the guise of the Egyptian storm god Seth, to Avaris. This initiated a cultic tradition that endured for 400 years until the Ramesside era when this divinity became the ancestral god of the 19th Dynasty (Sethe 1930; Montet 1931; von Beckerath 1954: 38–41; Stadelmann 1965; Stadelmann 1967: 41–42; Te Velde 1967: 124–125; Bietak 1990: 11; Kitchen 1999: 168–172).

Neḥesy is represented on a logogram as a Levantine king wearing a high conical crown, carved on an obelisk found in Tanis but most likely originating in Avaris (Petrie 1889: 8, pl. III/19A–D, enlarged plan, block 198; Griffith 1888: 19–20; Leclant & Yoyotte 1957: 50–57; von Beckerath 1964: 83–84; Bietak 2022: fig. 2). Monuments associated with this king are scattered throughout the eastern Delta (Bietak 1984a: figs. 4–5; Bietak 2022: fig. 5). For instance, within a sacred precinct at Tell el–Dab'a, two limestone door posts carved with Neḥesy's names were discovered, albeit in a secondary position. However, the only monumental buildings from which these

[5] During the Middle Kingdom, the region of Sichem in northern Palestine belonged to Retjenu (Khu–Sobek inscription, see i.a., Peet 1914; Baines 1987; Goedicke 1998). From what we can gather from the Story of Sinuhe (there Upper Retjenu), Retjenu also encompasses all of Lebanon. This is further supported by lists from Thutmose and the Amada Stela of Amenhotep II. For Retjenu in general, see Gardiner 1947: 142–149; Posener 1949: 72–73; Fecht 1984: 473–477; Kopetzky & Bietak 2016: 369–372; Mourad 2015:199; Vassiliev 2020. According to the inscription on the Mastaba of Khnumhotep III in Dahshur, the land of Ullaza in the very north of Lebanon also belongs to Retjenu (Allen 2008: 33)

[6] About the chronology of the site, see recently Bietak 2021b.

[7] Ryholt 1997: 94–99; however, proposes, based on the seriation of scarabs, the existence of five predecessors of Nehesy.

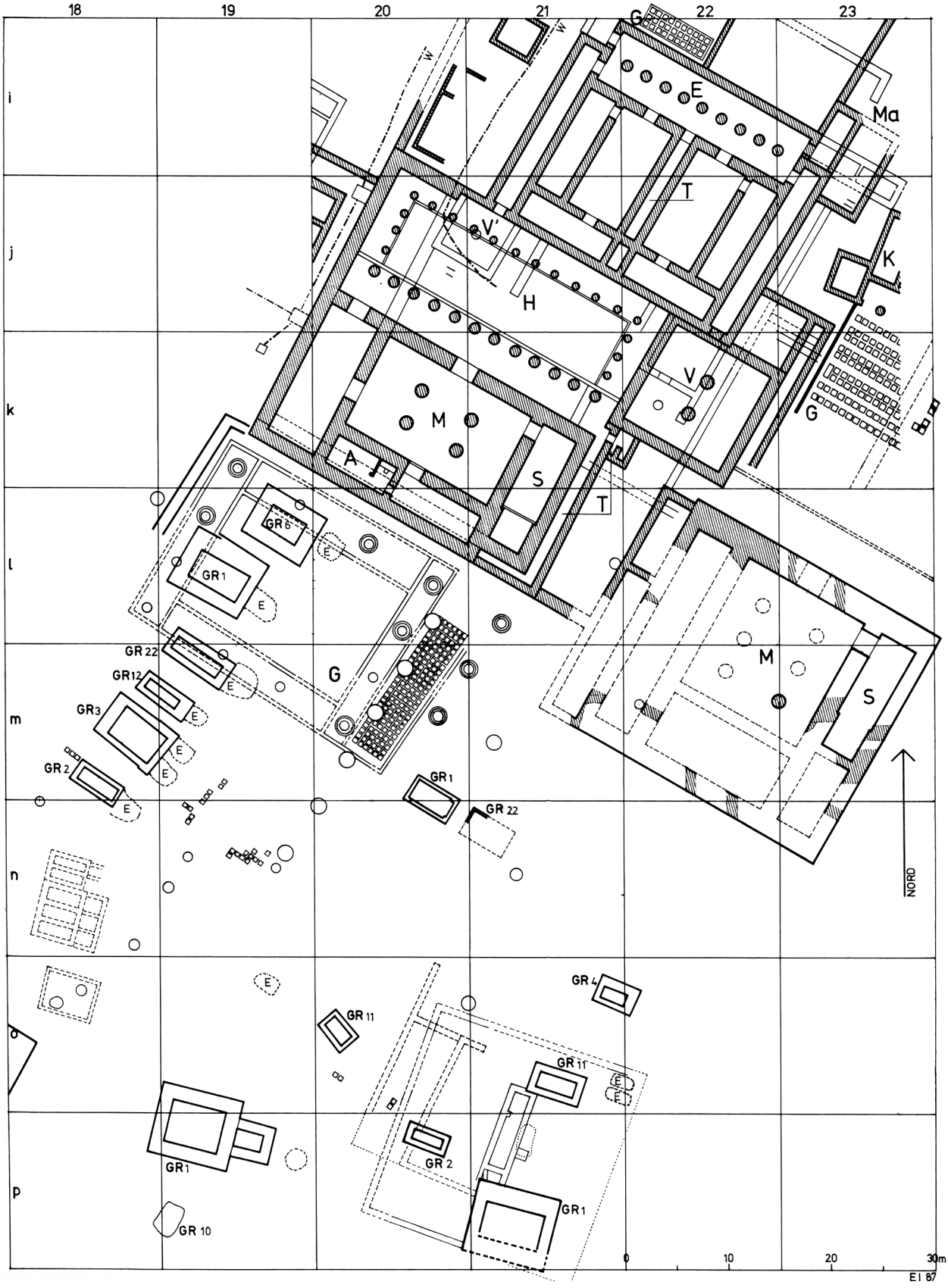


Fig. 8 Plan of a palatial mansion of the early 13th Dynasty (Phase G/4) at Tell el-Dab'a with enclosed cemetery (Plan D. Eigner)

blocks could have originated are the two Near Eastern temples of northern Syrian design (Bietak 1981/1986: 247–260, figs.8–9; Bietak 1991b: 22–24, 39, fig. 3; Bietak 1996a: 36–42, figs 30–32; Bietak 1997:105–108, figs. 420–422; Bietak 2009: 209–212, fig. 4–5; Bietak 2016a: 224–234, fig. 4; Bietak 2019a: fig. 3). And since they are not one but two blocks with the king's names, it is unlikely that they were spoliae taken to Avaris (Bietak 2022: fig. 28).

III. The Rulers of the Hill Countries

The pre–Hyksos palace was burned down (Bietak & Forstner–Müller 2009: figs. 25–27; Bietak et al. 2012/2013: figs. 16, 20A) **(Fig. 9)**, as signs of conflagration were found wherever the old palace was uncovered through excavation. Given the challenges of igniting a mudbrick building with robust walls (Gordon 1953: 149), the transition from the 14th to the 15th Dynasty was evidently not peaceful.

How can we identify the rule of the Hyksos through urban development, architecture, and innovations? The appearance of the Hyksos marked a new era in Avaris, bringing about significant changes during the rise of the 15th Dynasty. The town's expansion was rapid (Figs. 2a-b); it initially covered c. 100 ha in the pre–Hyksos Period, but by Phase E/1, it had already grown to an area of 250 ha (Bietak 2010a: 11–17, figs. 3,7). The building material changed from sandy bricks to mudbricks, better suited for the winter rains. Settlement density increased during the Hyksos Period, leading to the encroachment of domestic buildings onto the old temple precinct and its surrounding cemeteries (Fig. 8). Notably, the principal shrine, Temple III (a large broad–room), remained intact until the end of the Hyksos Period **(Fig. 10)**. However, the second largest shrine, a bent–axis temple (Temple II), was replaced by a mudbrick building that no longer displays characteristics of a Near Eastern Temple. Instead, it might have served as a cultic building due to the width of its walls.

A large new temple was constructed c. 600 meters to the west–north–west **(Fig. 11)**, but unfortunately, its remains are in a badly preserved state (Bietak 1991a: 41; Bietak 2007: 775, fig. 19; Bietak 2009: 222, figs. 14–15; V. Müller 2008: 281, 284, fig. 181). As a Hyksos shrine, it appears to be of Egyptian temple type (Area F/I). However, similar to the earlier sacred precinct, it was surrounded by tombs. Aside from the change in temple types, there were also alterations in offering customs. Whilst in the pre–Hyksos period, charred remains of offerings were placed next to the altar, from the Hyksos Period onward, sherds and bones were interred in round pits near the altar (V. Müller 2008: 288–294, tab. 48). A new palace **(Fig. 12)** was built on top of the burned pre–Hyksos palace following a similar plan (Bietak 2010a: 21, 50–52; Bietak 2010b; Bietak 2010c; Bietak 2010d; Bietak 2011; Bietak & Forstner–Müller 2006; Bietak & Forstner–Müller 2009: 110–111; Bietak et al. 2012/2013: figs. 16–20A). However, it deviated from the typical Egyptian type

Fig. 9 Remains of conflagration in the pre-Hyksos Palace, Phase F-E/2, with burnt walls (photographs © M. Bietak, Archives Austrian Archaeological Institute)

Fig. 10 Sacred precinct in Tell el-Dabʿa in the time of Phase E/3-2 (© M. Bietak)

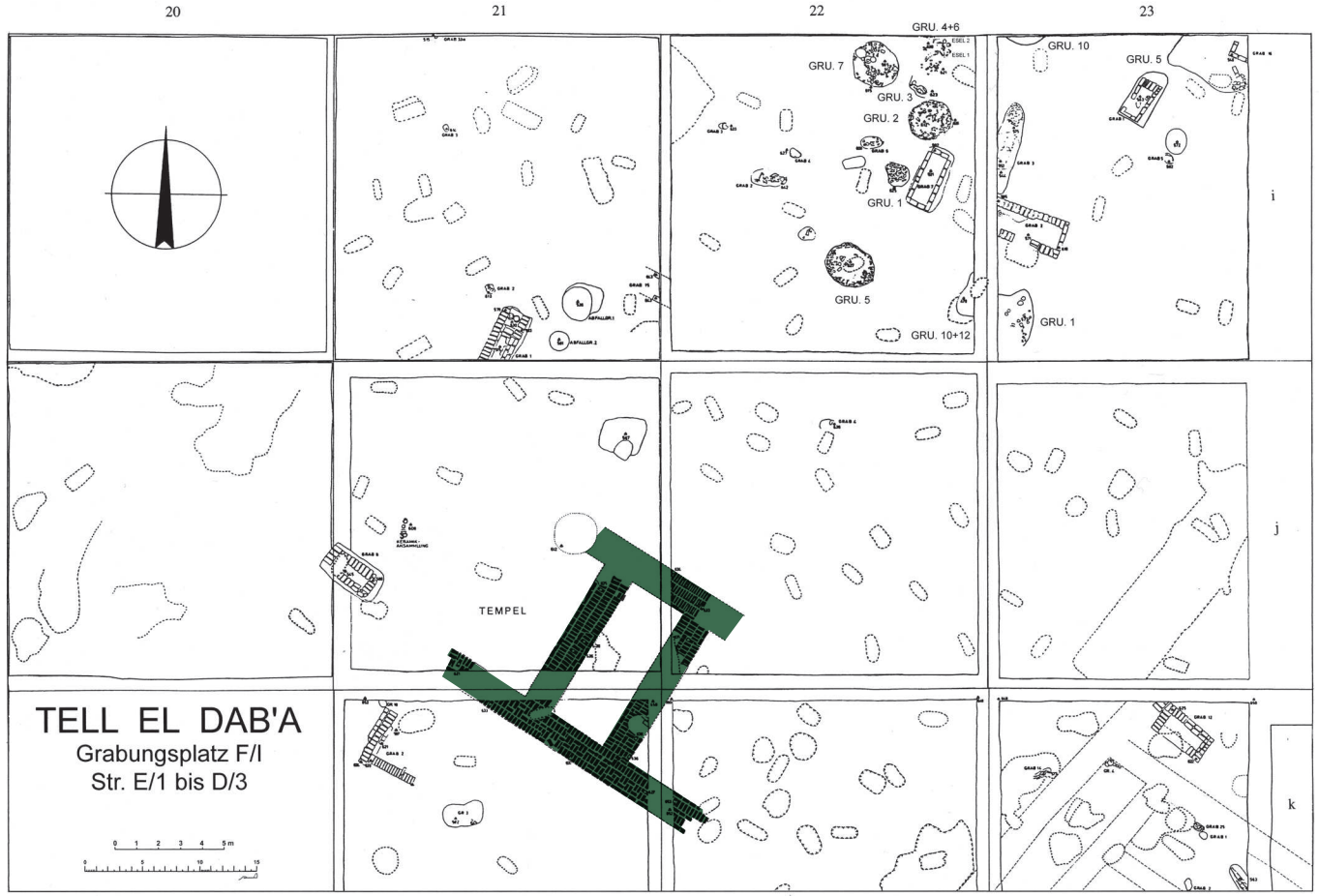


Fig. 11 New temple from the Hyksos Period (Phases E/1-D/3-2) (after Bietak 2007a: fig. 19)

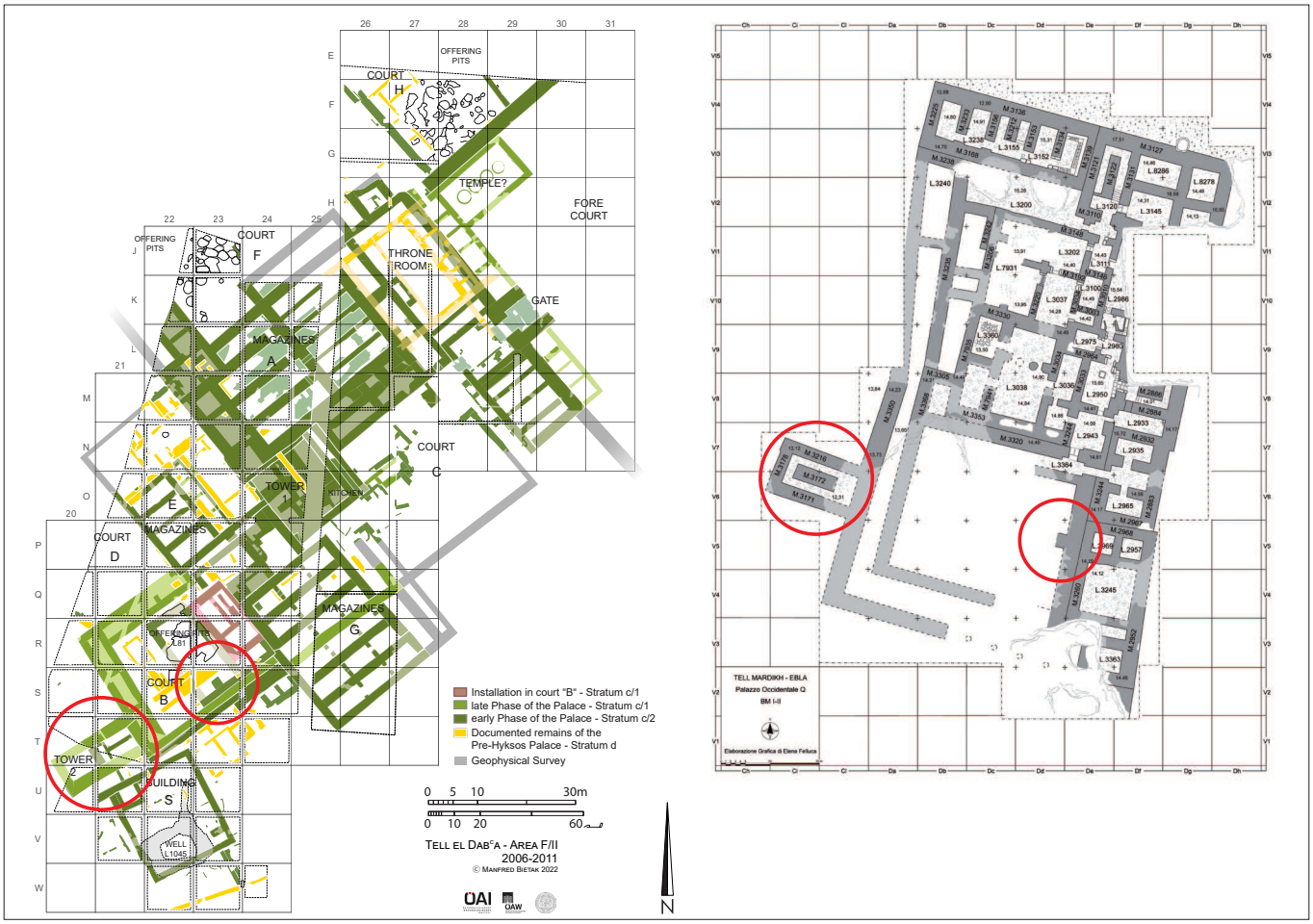


Fig. 12 The Hyksos Palace in Area F/II at Tell el-Dab'a and the Palace Q at Ebla (© M. Bietak and P. Matthiae).
The red circles signify similarities of the two palaces. The walls in yellow on the left plan belong to the pre-Hyksos palace of the 14th Dynasty.

Fig. 13 The entrance situation of the Hyksos Palace F/II at Tell el-Dab'a and the palace of the Old Babylonian Period at Mari (after Bietak et al. 2012/2013: fig. 12, graphic N. Math)

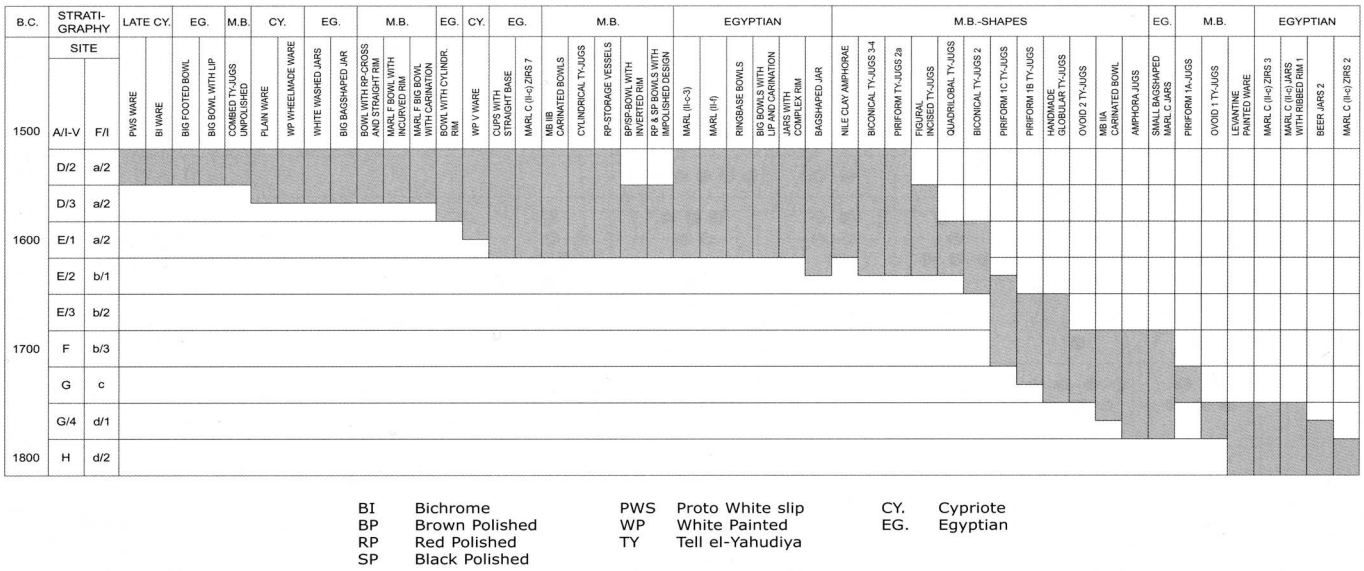


Fig. 14 Simplified occurrence seriation graph of ceramic type groups with short time spans, showing significant changes in the pottery corpus from the beginning of the Hyksos Period (after Bietak 1991: fig. 13)

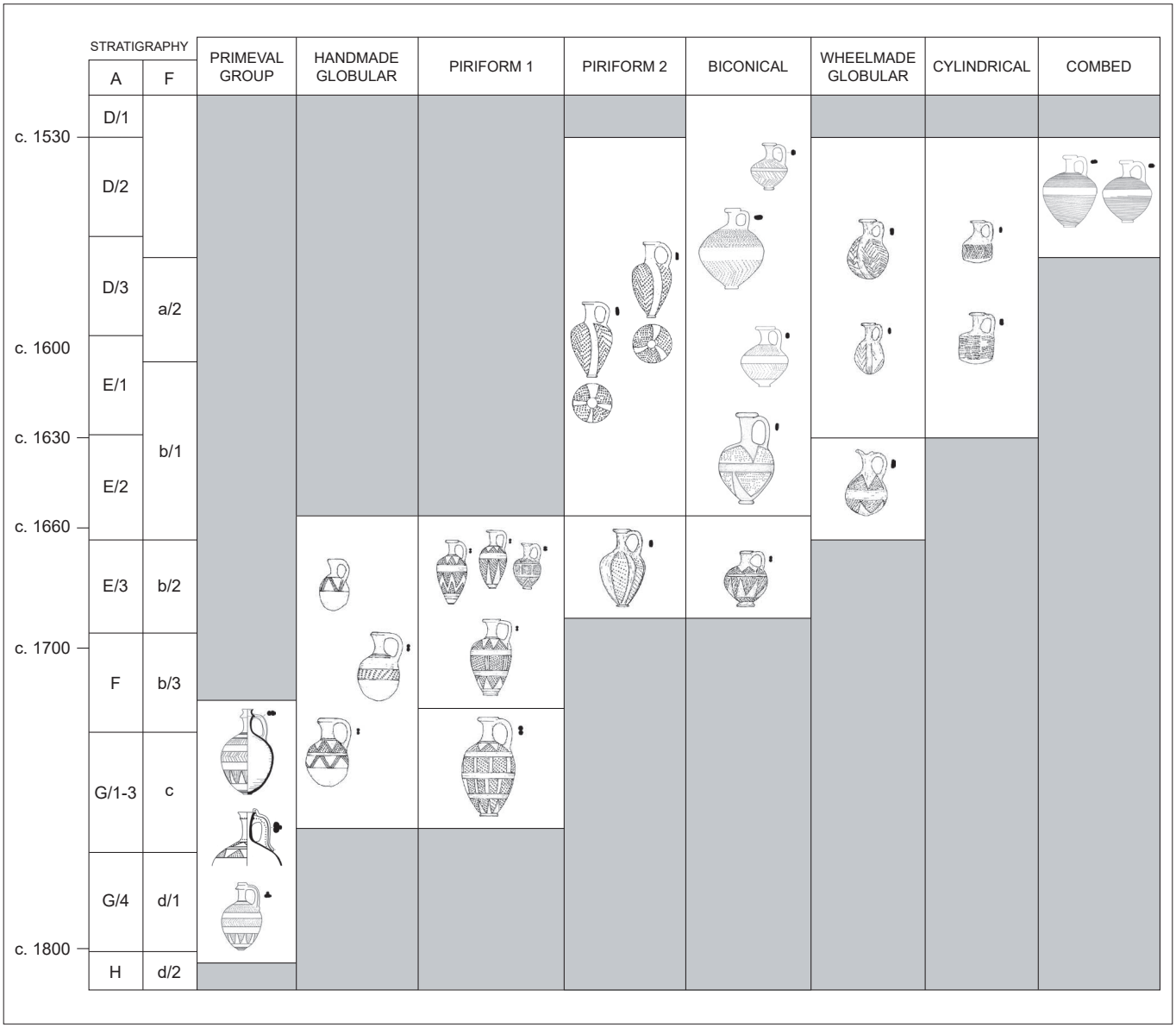


Fig. 15 Occurrence of the main types of Tell el-Yahudiya Ware in Tell el-Dab'a (after Bietak et al. 2001: Fig. 4). Also this ware shows distinct appearances of new types with the beginning of the Hyksos period. The occurrences from Phase D/1 are rare and most probably only redundant

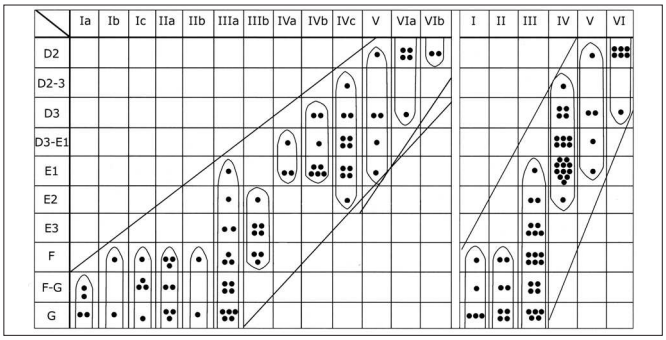


Fig. 16 Occurrence seriation graph of scarab types in Tell el-Dab'a (after Mlinar 2004: fig. 15). New types of scarabs appear with Phase E/1-2, which represents the early Hyksos Period.

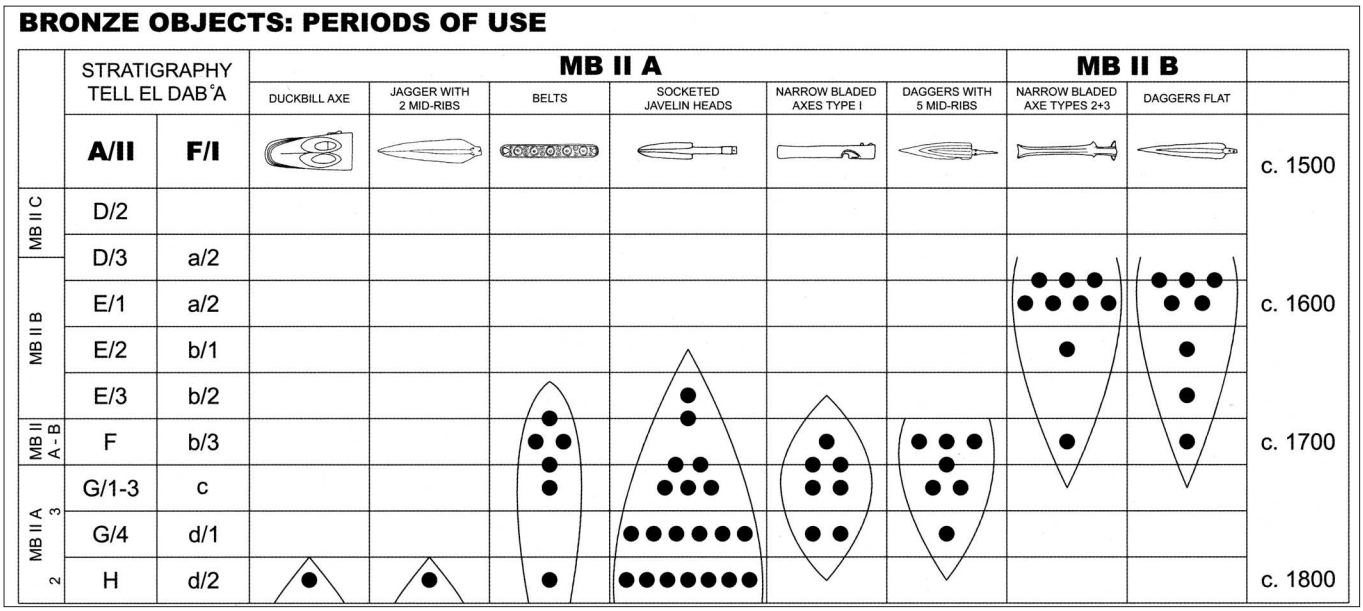


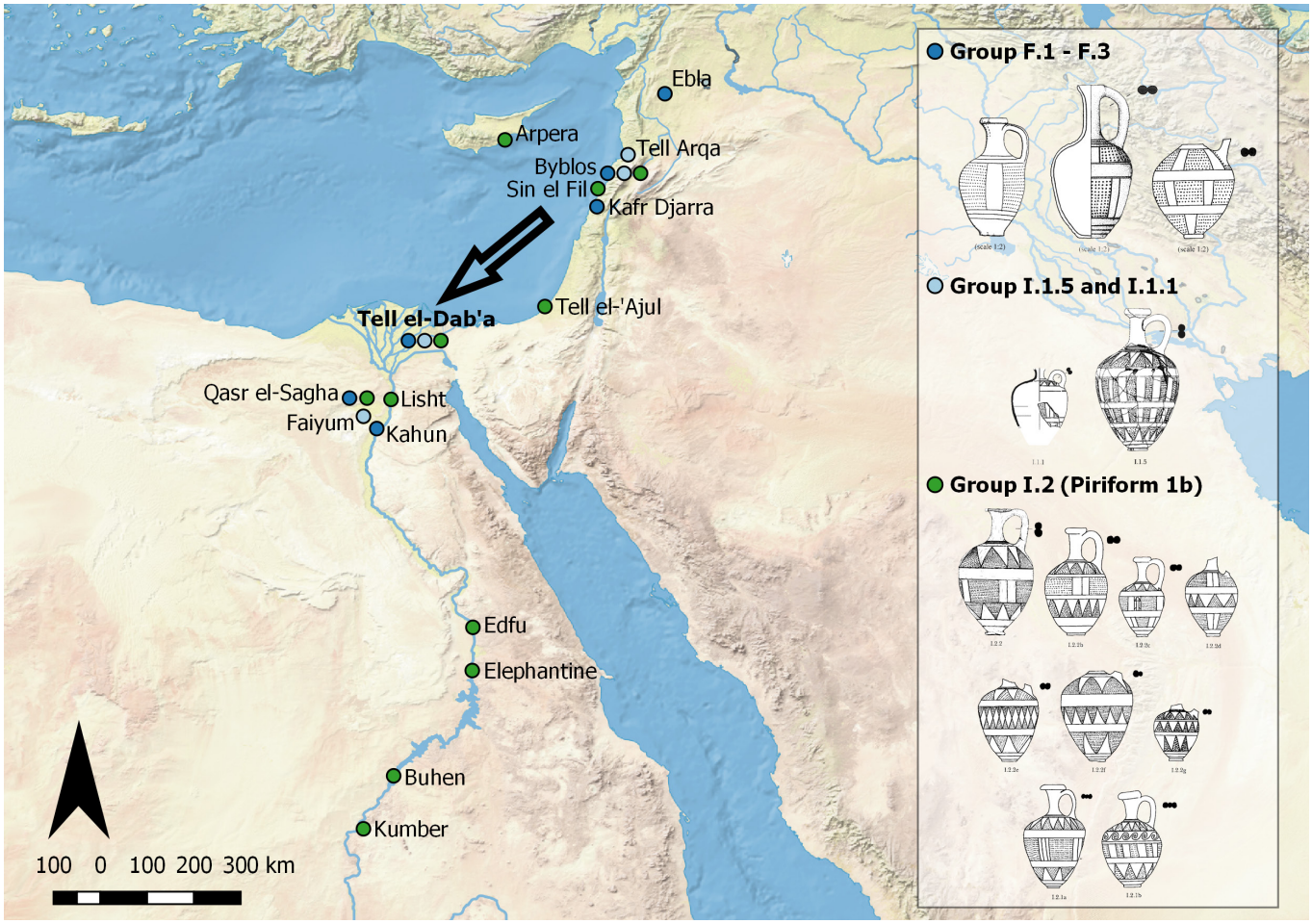
Fig. 17 Occurrences of MB IIA and MB IIB metal weapons in the stratigraphy of Tell el-Dab'a (after Bietak 1991: Fig. 16 and Bietak et al. 2001, fig. 2)

of palace, which features a consecutive and symmetrical layout. Instead, some of its key elements bear a resemblance to Ebla's contemporary Palace Q (Matthiae 1980; Matthiae 1983; Matthiae 2019) and the Old Assyrian Palace in Assur (Heinrich 1984: 38–43, figs. 23–24; Pedde & Lundström 2008: pl. 3–4). Its entrance architecture draws parallels with several Near Eastern palaces, including the palace of Mari **(Fig. 13)** (Parrot 1958: plan; Margueron 1982: figs 146–151; Heinrich 1984: 78–81, figs. 40, 41; Margueron 2004: figs. 437–438).

The most significant change between the 14th and 15th Dynasties is evident in the corpus of ceramics, scarabs, and weaponry (Bietak 1991a: figs. 12–13; Bietak et al. 2001: figs. 11–13; Forstner–Müller 2003). New types of pottery emerged, especially new types of Tell el–Yahudiya ware **(Fig. 14-15)**. While locally produced Middle Bronze Age vessels increased, there was a simultaneous trend towards adopting more Egyptian pottery styles. A change in styles can also be noticed in the production of scarabs **(Fig. 16)** (Mlinar 2004). Signs of economic decline are also conspicuous (Kopetzky 2010, 175, fig. 52; Vilain 2019b; Vilain 2021) **(Fig. 23)**. Notably, the import of tin came to a halt, resulting in weapons and tools being forged of unalloyed copper instead of bronze (Philip 2006: 214, Tab. 21). This trend coincided with the introduction of Middle Bronze IIB weaponry **(Fig. 17)** (Bietak 1991a: fig. 16).

In the final phase at Tell el–Dab'a, no metal weapon deposits are found in tombs, and the absence of "warrior burials" is notable. Calcite koḥl pots were substituted and replicated using black or red burnished pottery. It is obvious that by this point, the Hyksos link to the calcite quarries at Hatnub was severed, likely during the 16th or 17th Dynasties in Thebes.[8] Imports from the Levant experienced a significant decline **(Fig. 23)** (Kopetzky 2010: 175–176, figs 52, 67), whereas imports from Cyprus saw an increase (Vilain 2018: graph 1; Vilain 2019a: graph 1). However, no decline in the health of the adult inhabitants of Avaris has been detected, but infant

[8] I we this detail to my colleague Silvia Prell.



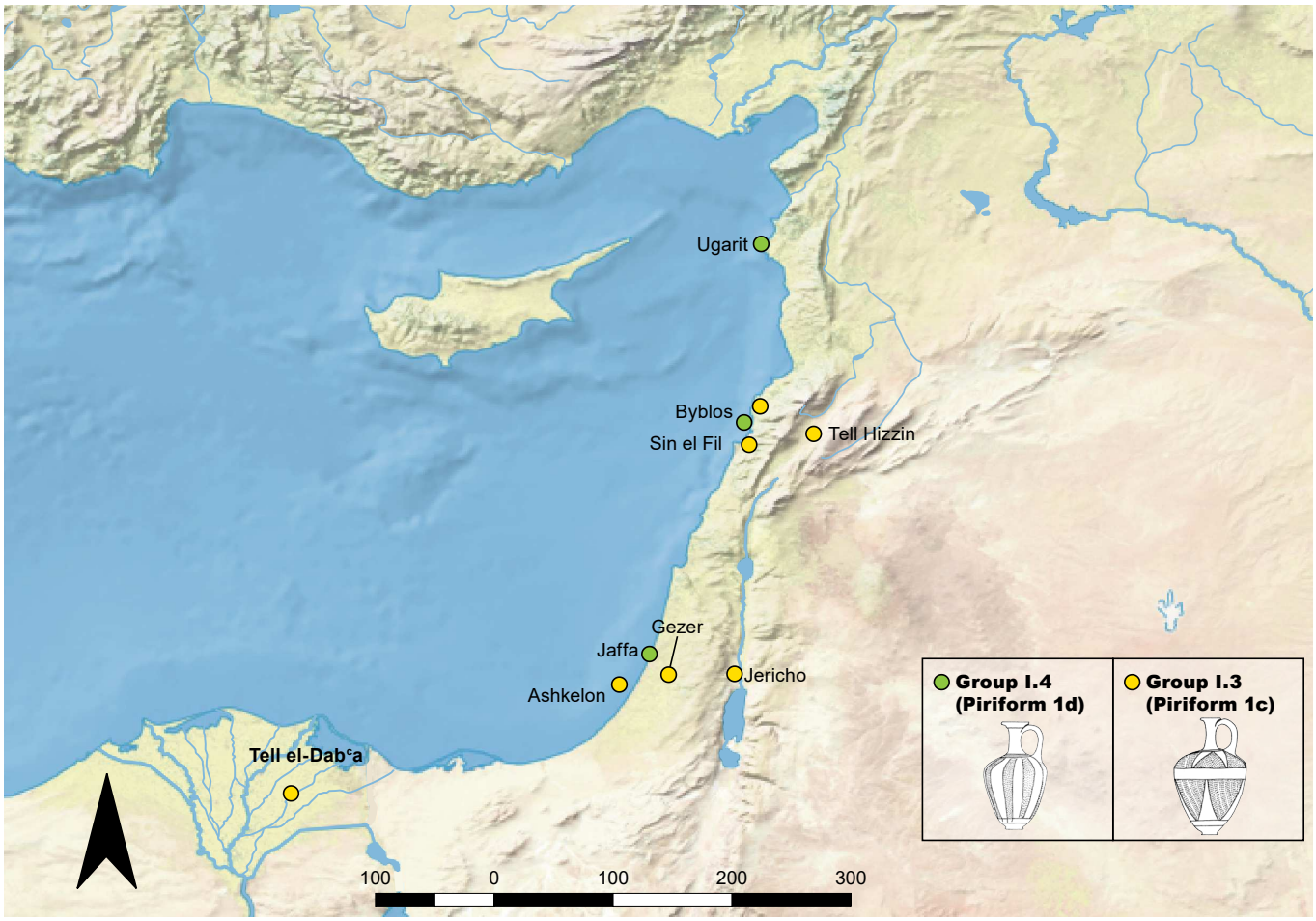


Fig. 18,19 Scatter of Piriform Ib (Fig. 18) and Piriform Ic (Fig. 19) Tell el-Yahudiya Ware, showing a distribution pattern in the northern Levant, in Egypt and in Nubia during the early 14th Dynasty (after Aston & Bietak 2012: figs. 96, 110, redrawn)

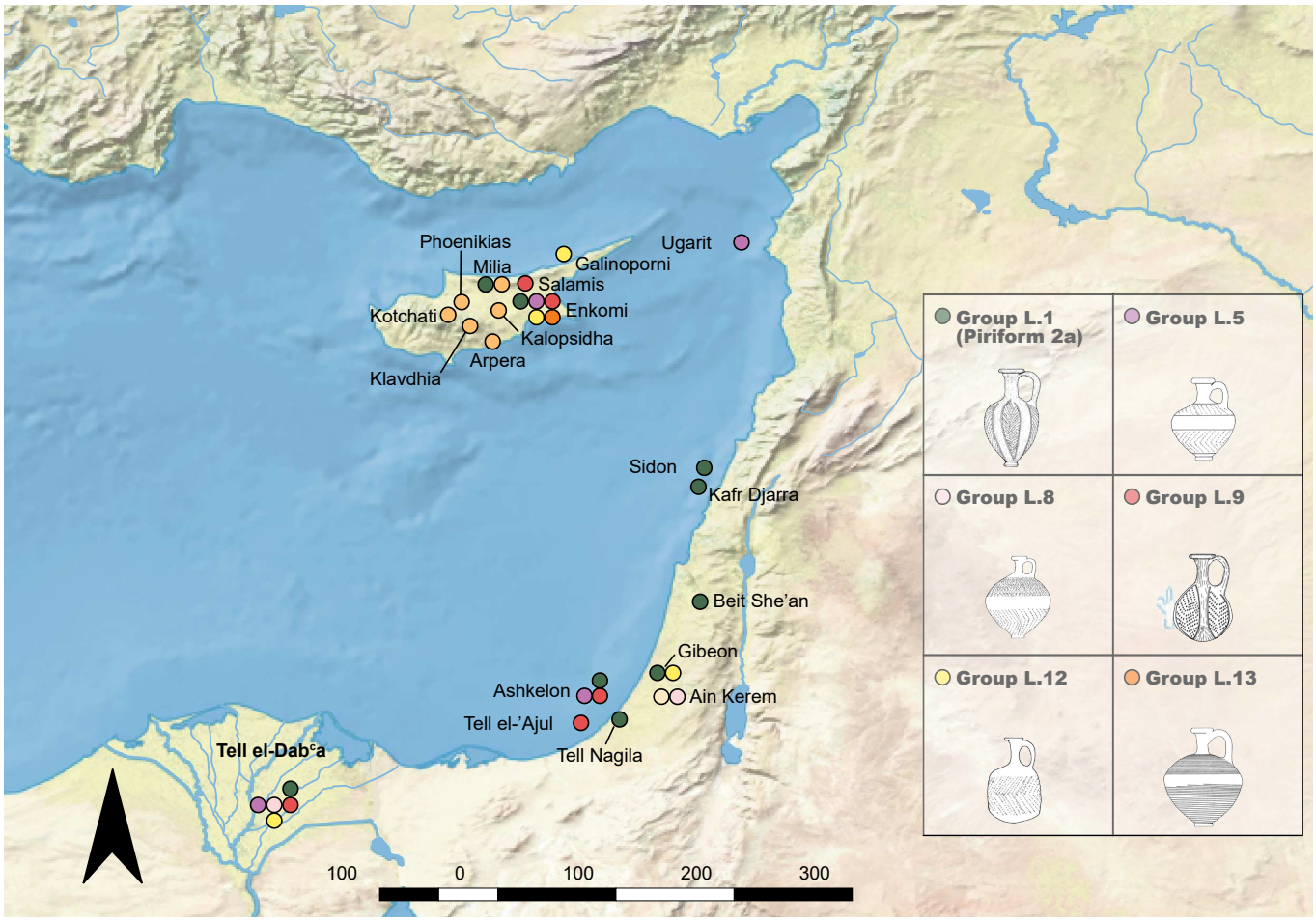


Fig. 20 Scatter of Piriform 2a and small biconical juglets of the Tell el-Yahudiya Ware during the Hyksos Period showing a strong presence in the southern Levant (a) and nearly an absence in the northern Levant (b) but frequent representation in Cyprus (after Aston & Bietak 2012: figs. 147 and 167).

mortality rates surged, indicating a deterioration in infant hygiene likely brought on by crowded living conditions. It is also clear that the population's dietary habits changed significantly with the rise of the 15th Dynasty, as teeth exhibit less plaque but stronger abrasion than before (Kharobi & Schutkowski 2019; Kharobi et al. 2021: 481–482).

One can also observe changes in burial customs. In Phases F–E/1, the majority of tombs were interred in clan-cemeteries within the settlement. Now, however, most burials became intramural or were arranged in courtyards. Whether this shift was due to the settlement's dense morphology or an influx of new people remains to be investigated. Nevertheless, the cemeteries that originated in the pre–Hyksos era were still in use at the beginning of Phase E/1, indicating continuity of the population from the 14th Dynasty into the Hyksos Period. This suggests that the newcomers likely settled in the expanding areas of the town.

One also notices important changes in the distribution of Tell el–Yahudiya Ware. During the early 14th Dynasty (Phase F), this pottery type, found in Tell el–Dab'a, was distributed across a portion of the northern Levant (Lebanon), the eastern Delta, and along the Nile valley to Nubia **(Fig. 18)** (Aston & Bietak 2012: figs. 96, 99). However, by the later 14th Dynasty (Phase E/3), there was a tendency toward more standardised, robust local production in the Delta. The scatters of Tell el–Yahudiya Ware once again covered the region of Lebanon, as well as the southern Levant, the eastern Delta, and the Nile Valley to Kerma (Aston & Bietak 2012: fig. 110).

A distinct variety of Tell el–Yahudiya ware, using a mix of incised lotus and bird motifs, can be found in the northern Levant, Cyprus, and, in addition to Tell el–Dab'a, also in Middle Egypt and Thebes (Aston & Bietak 2012: fig. 135). This style, however, is related to a ware to which the famous Lisht jar belongs, which seems most at home in Byblos (Bietak & Kopetzky 2009).

With the onset of the Hyksos Period, new, smaller–scale styles emerged **(Fig. 20)**. The piriform 2a juglets covered the southern Levant, Lower Egypt (with a few specimens found in Upper Egypt), and

Fig. 21 Scatter of Hyksos royal scarabs in the southern Levant (after Weinstein 1981: fig. 3)

Nubia. Only a single juglet of this type was found in the northern Levant (Aston & Bietak 2012: fig. 147). Small biconical juglets appear to have by-passed the Levant entirely, except for Ashkelon and Ras–Shamra, yet they are notably prevalent in Cyprus (Aston & Bietak 2012: figs 147, 167, 182, 189). Avaris also produced local variations of Tell el–Yahudiya Ware.

Within the Levant, scarabs inscribed with Hyksos 15th Dynasty royal names cluster only in the southern Levant, with very few being found north of the Mount Carmel ridge **(Fig. 21)** (Weinstein 1981: 8–10, fig. 3; Weinstein 1991: 107–108). Due to this distribution pattern and the simultaneous presences of these scarabs in destroyed MB IIC sites, Daphna Ben–Tor and James M. Weinstein argue that the origin of the Hyksos Dynasty lies in the southern Levant (Weinstein 1981: 8–10; Ben–Tor 2007: 189–190; Ben–Tor 2021: 247). However, the material cultures of the southern Levant and the eastern Delta exhibit such distinct differences that this conclusion is not viable. This is especially true given that the Tell el–Yahudiya Ware represents a distinct cultural province in the southern Levant **(Fig. 22)** (Aston & Bietak 2012: figs. 26, 41, 49,57). While in the pre–Hyksos Period, the major cultural influx into the Delta arrived from the northern Levant, during the Hyksos Period, cultural influence flowed from the Delta to the southern Levant. Nevertheless, the abovementioned local types of Tell el–Yahudiya ware indicate that this region maintained its cultural independence from the eastern Delta.

Another innovation of the Hyksos is the introduction of long–distance letter diplomacy, employing Akkadian as a diplomatic language well before the Amarna Period. Serendipitously, a fragment of an Akkadian letter, written in a southern Mesopotamian script, was discovered in a well associated with the Hyksos palace. This fragment, written in the first person, dates to the final decades before the fall of Babylon (van Koppen & Radner 2009; Bietak 2010b: 986–990, fig. 14). The exchange of not only letters but also goods is attested by bullae bearing impressions of Old Babylonian seals on packages (van Koppen & Lehmann 2012/2013; Lehmann 2021: 522–523, pl. 374/9534L, 3560Q). On the other hand, it is important to mention the basalt lion of Khayan, which surfaced in the 19th century in an antiquities market in Baghdad and is likely to have originated from Babylon (Lit. in Quirke 1994b).

Another, albeit gruesome, innovation attributed to the Hyksos was the practice of severing the right hands of their adversaries. This custom was also observed in the Egyptian New Kingdom, where it was used to tally the killing achievements of soldiers post–battle (Bietak 2012; Bietak et al. 2012/2013: 31–32, fig. 14A–C; Gresky et al. 2023). In the forecourt of the Hyksos Palace, a pit containing a single right hand, deliberately placed within the foundation ditch of a Near Eastern–type of broad–room temple that was added to the palace during a later phase.[9] Two additional pits, containing a total of 11 right hands, were found to the north–east of this temple, situated on top of silo remains. This represents the earliest and thus far only evidence of severed hands – in this case, not on a battlefield, but rather in the forecourt of a royal palace, right in front of a throne room.

As a form of punishment (Candelora 2019), these

[9] The interpretation of the date by Matic in Candelora 2021 has, therefore, to be rejected.

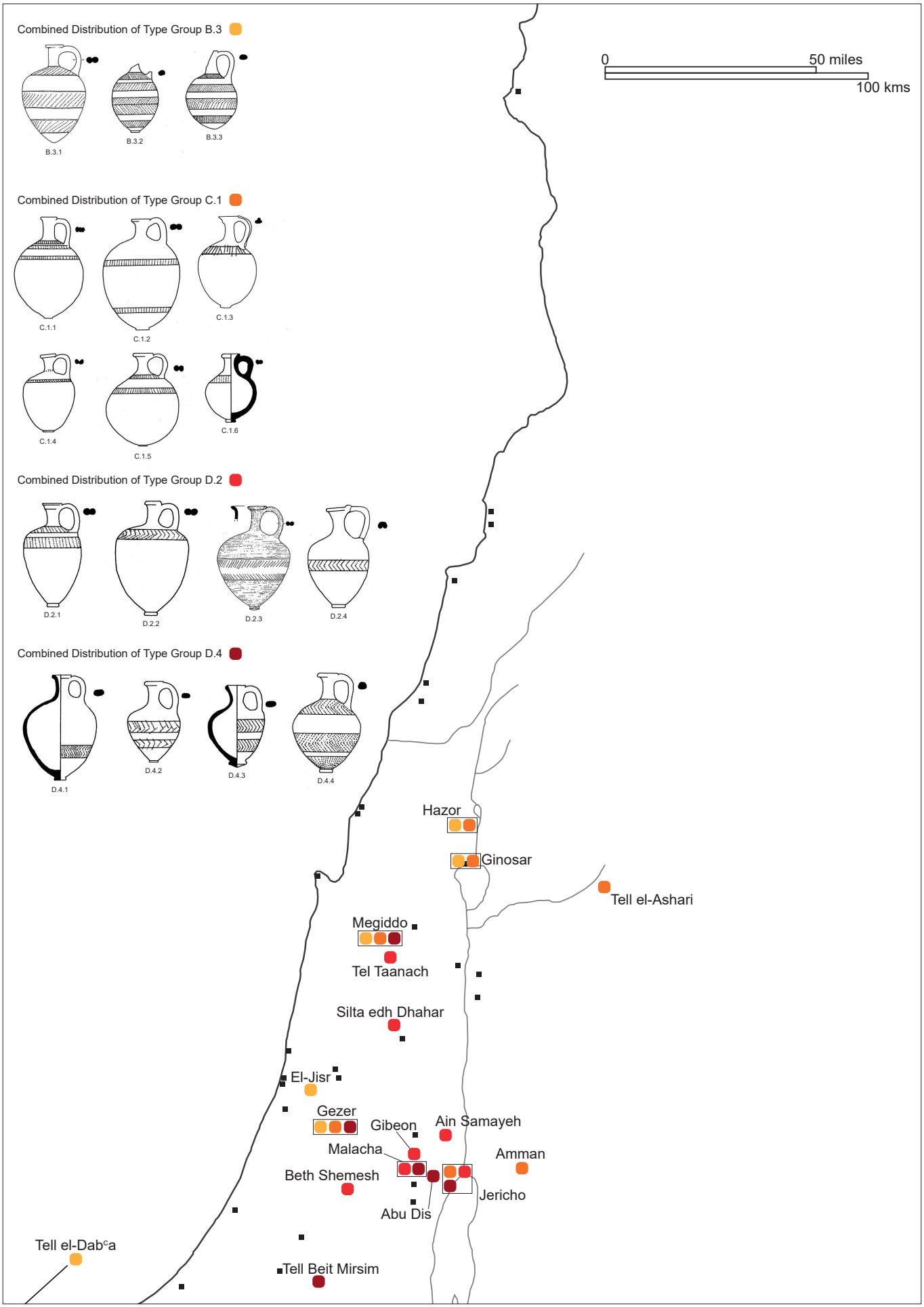


Fig. 22 Scatter of Tell el-Yahudiya Ware, typical for the southern Levant and nearly missing in Egypt (after Aston & Bietak 2012: figs. 26, 41, 49, 57 combined).

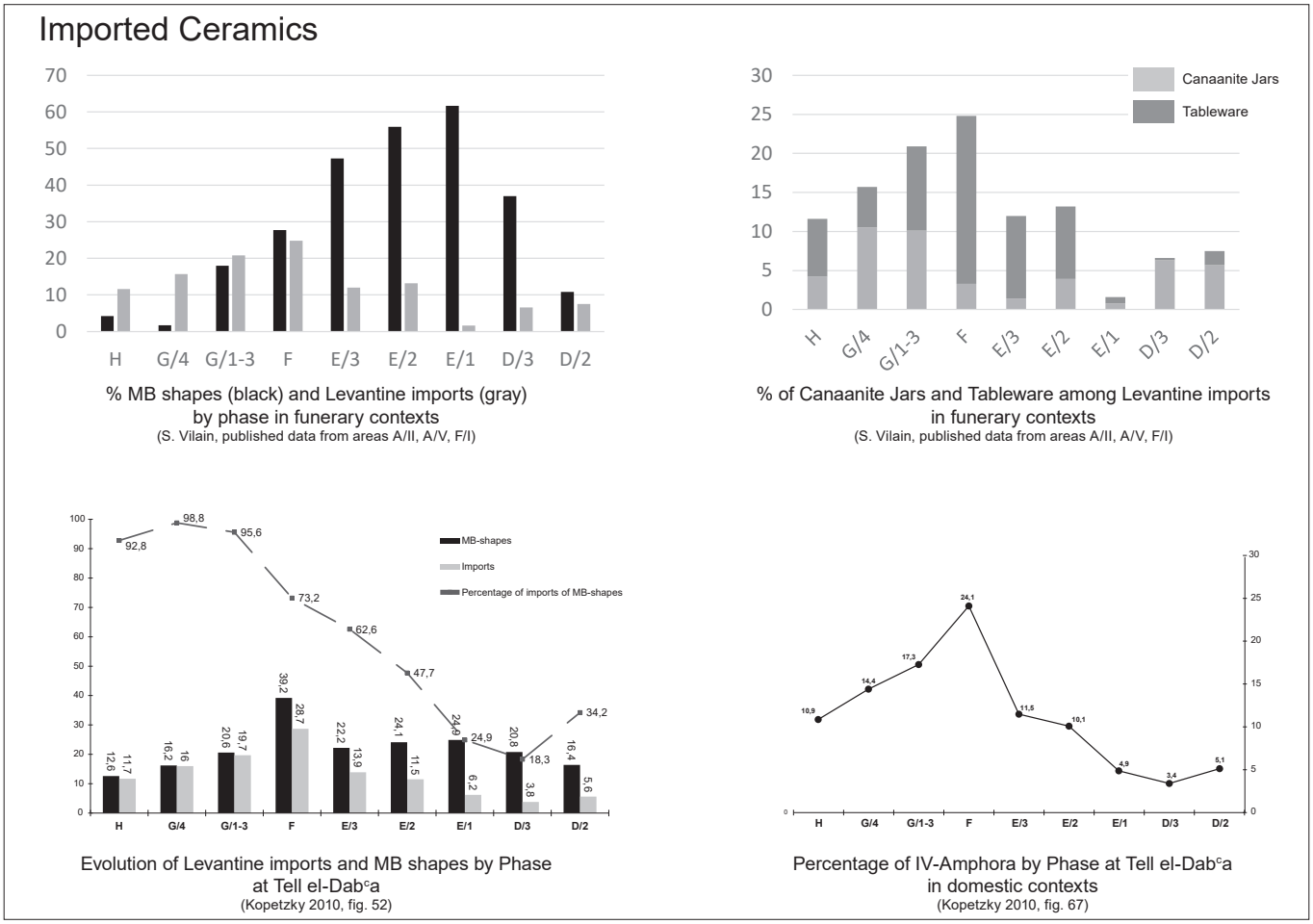


Fig. 23 Diagram showing the decline of imports from the Levant during the second part of the 14th Dynasty and the Hyksos Period (after Kopetzky 2010: fig. 52 and Vilain 2021)

measures—entailing the collection of 12 severed right hands—appear unlikely. The presumed evidence concerning the severing of a criminal's right hand is rooted in a misinterpretation of papyrus Salt 124, l, 7. This instance involves a tomb robber removing the hand from the mummy of Pharaoh Seti II, most probably to swiftly extract precious metal bezels from the fingers. From Ancient Egypt, we are acquainted with the practice of severing the right hand solely as a means of collecting a reward for acts of bravery and to count the enemies killed on the battlefield. Beyond this evidence, other cogent reasons suggest that the Hyksos introduced the custom of severing hands to Egypt (Stefanović 2003; Bietak 2012; Bietak et al. 2012/2013: 31–32; Gresky et al. 2023; Bietak 2023). The evidence will be published in a forthcoming article. It seems likely that these severed hands were collected following a battle, likely in close proximity to the Hyksos residence.

IV. Conclusion

Significant changes are evident in the transition from the 14th to the 15th Dynasty at Tell el–Dab'a. The rapid and substantial expansion of the town was coupled with a shift from imported ceramics to locally produced wares. This shift introduced new hybrid types of pottery production. Simultaneously, Egyptian elements in the material culture were strengthened, even as there was a noticeable increase in Asiatic burial customs, with a trend towards intramural burials.

Where did the people of the 15th Dynasty originate? Surely not directly from the Levant, as there was no new influx of imported wares. On the contrary, Levantine imports decreased from 11.5% in the transitional Phase E/2 (pre–Hyksos/Hyksos) to 6.2% in Phase E/1, with most imports comprising Canaanite amphorae from 10.1% in Phase E/2 to 4.9% in Phase E/1 **(Fig. 23)** (Kopetzky 2010: figs. 52, 67). Middle Bronze Age pottery was predominantly locally produced, with the emergence of new types that were also created locally. It appears more plausible that the people responsible for the

rise of Hyksos rule came from another region within Egypt, several generations after their initial immigration. However, strontium isotope analysis contradicts this conclusion, as it indicates that c. 50% of the sampled individuals from the Hyksos Period were raised outside the Nile valley (Stantis & Schutkowski 2019; Stantis et al. 2020). The samples, however, are restricted to Area A/II, which reveal that clan cemeteries established around the 14th Dynasty sacred precinct remained in use until the first half of the Hyksos Period. This suggests that the impetus for immigration might still have been in effect.[10] The tombs of new immigrants linked to the onset of Hyksos rule should be located in Areas F/I–II or H in Tell el–Dab'a. Their exploration may shed light on this issue, but as of now, they remain unexamined using advanced scientific methods.

Within Egypt, we cannot expect to find potential Asiatic power strongholds in the Wadi Tumilat or at other sites in the Eastern Delta, as most of these places were settled only from the Hyksos Period onward (overview: Mourad 2015: 19–61; Mourad 2021: 72–82). However, we are informed by the Illahun papyri of Asiatic settlements, the so–called *wn.wt*, in the broader vicinity of the town of El–Lahun and the Itjy–tawy residence, likely situated in the agricultural zone and along the desert rim at Lisht (Fischer 1959: 264; Luft 1993; F. Arnold 1996). The expression *wn.t* has been classified, since the Old Kingdom, as enclosed fortified settlements in the Levant endowed with buttresses **(Fig. 24)** (Urk. 103.12: line 24: *Wny*–inscription).

Also dating to the late Old Kingdom are the fortresses defended by Asiatics depicted in the tombs of Inty in Deshashe (Petrie 1898: 5–7, pl. IV; McFarlane 2003: pl. 48) and of Kaiemheset in Saqqara (Quibell & Hayter 1927: frontispiece; Kanawati & McFarlane 1993: pl 27). The representation in the tomb of Inty is especially noteworthy for examination, as the fortress bears a striking resemblance in its plan to the classifiers in the *Wny*–inscription **(Fig. 25)**. In the 11th Dynasty, representations of a fortress defended by Asiatics appear in the tomb of Intef (TT 386) (Jaroš–Deckert 1984: 37–44, pl. 17, Faltkarte 1). However, it is unlikely that this image was a direct copy of an Old Kingdom siege scene, as in this instance, the fortress is depicted in a side view rather than in the form of a plan. These depictions now raise a very serious question about

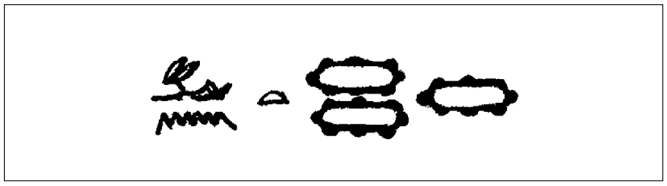


Fig. 24 Classifier for fortified Asiatic settlements in the Wny-Inscription from the 6th Dynasty (after Urk. 103.12: line 24).

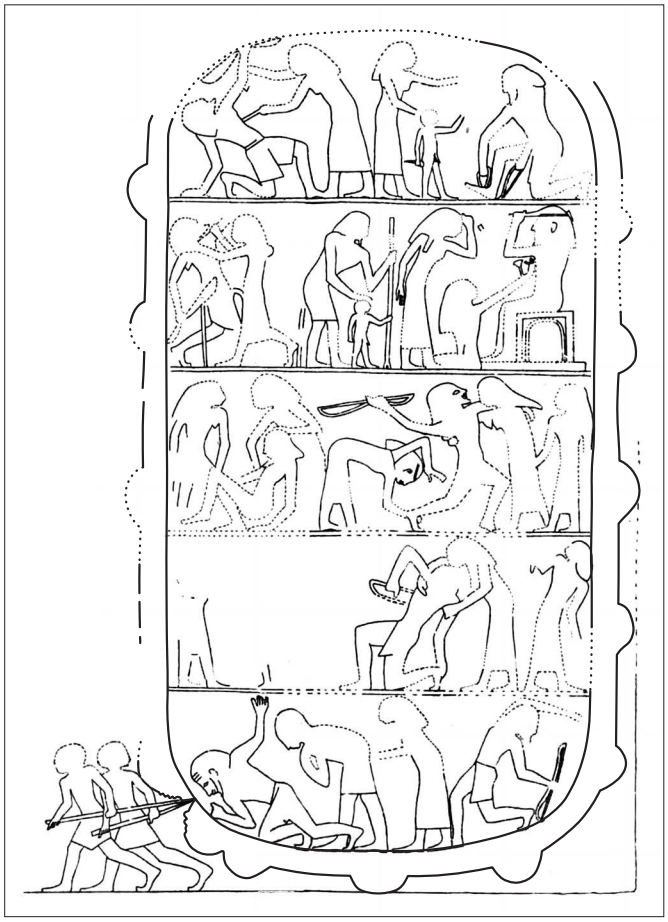


Fig. 25 Representation of a fortified Asiatic settlement in the tomb of Inty in Deshashe of the late Old Kingdom (after Petrie 1898, pl. IV).

the whereabouts of these fortresses, because during the Early Bronze IV/Intermediate Bronze Age Period, which dates from c. 2,500 BCE onwards (i.a.: Regev et al. 2012; Höflmayer 2014; Höflmayer 2018), there were no towns or fortifications in the southern Levant. Doubts, quite reasonably, might arise regarding the precision of this radiocarbon–based chronology due to the span of half a millennium for this rural and seminomadic interlude in the southern Levant. As an alternative possibility, I proposed, particularly in the case of the long reign of King Nebhepetre' Mentuhotep, that these strongholds, defended by Asiatic mercenaries, could have been located in the Nile Delta and had to be conquered by the Egyptian crown to achieve unification (Bietak 2006: 288–289). One might wonder whether

[10] About the pull factor in immigration processes see Proiglinger 2021.

such fortresses could have served as the precursors to the *wn.wt* mentioned in the Illahun Papyri of the 12th Dynasty (Luft 1993; Luft 1998). These papyri refer to Asiatics of various professions working in the environs of the Itjy–tawy residence. Traditionally, many of these Asiatics may have been employed as soldiers or labourers and organised in a military fashion. While this may not be evident from the texts themselves, a closer examination of the professions of Asiatics in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom reveals this organisational pattern (Schneider 2003: 245–252).

Wall paintings in Beni Hassan illustrate entire units of Asiatic soldiers with their own dress codes and weaponry, participating in Egypt's internal warfare in the early Middle Kingdom (Bietak 1992: fig. 5/1–3; Bietak 1993/1994: fig. 1; Mourad 2015: 81–86, figs. 4.46–50; Saretta 2016: 80–86, figs. 3.21–22). These Asiatic soldiers also joined expeditions to Hatnub, the Sinai (Černý 1935: fig. 1; Gardiner et al. 1935: pl. 51/no. 163; Quirke 1994a; PM VII: 39), and other desert regions within Egypt alongside Nubians of diverse origins (Anthes 1928: 32–62; Redford 1992: 73; Shaw 2010: 147–155), leaving behind proto–alphabetic inscriptions (Darnell et al. 2005: 89, figs. 23–27).

Turning our attention back to the *wn.wt* settlements, their classifier prompts us to consider whether these sites might have originally functioned as fortified garrisons for soldiers. The identification of at least one Western Semitic name[11] among the kings of the 13th Dynasty invites speculation that a foreigner of Asiatic origin could ascend to kingship, probably through a career in the military. This lends credence to the idea that military garrisons with Asiatic soldiers could have been located near the royal residence, eventually acquiring influence and even leadership roles within the court. Moreover, the name of King *Mr–mšʿ*, meaning "The General",[12] indicates the significant influence of the military in the 13th Dynasty. While we cannot definitively determine if this individual was of Asiatic origin, the absence of a personal name lends weight to such a conjecture. Such a development could also account for the later capability of people with Asiatic ancestry to topple the regime of the 13th Dynasty.

There are also archaeological indicators suggesting that during the time corresponding to the 12th, 13th, and 14th Dynasties in Avaris, Asiatic populations lived in or near *Itjy–tawy* and the town of El–Lahun. In the course of excavations conducted by the Metropolitan Museum, at Lisht–North (1906–1922), a settlement and tombs were found at the desert's edge, containing pottery from the Levant as well as select specimens from the Aegean (Do. Arnold et al. 1995).[13] Of particular prevalence were Canaanite amphorae (Do. Arnold et al. 1995: fig. 6), dipper juglets, and the early series of Tell el–Yahudiya juglets, coined by Robert Merrillees as "El–Lisht Ware" (Merrillees 1974: 48–52, 59–67, 73–77, figs. 38–40, 42–53; Merrillees 1978). The latter artefacts are typical of Phases F–E/3, corresponding to the 14th Dynasty at Tell el–Dabʿa (Aston & Bietak 2012: 128–179).

Naturally, one cannot claim that "pots follow people", and the prevailing assumption is that these vessels are indeed imports (Do. Arnold et al. 1995). However, let us delve into an in–depth examination of the Lisht–North settlement, which was excavated by Arthur Mace and assessed more recently by Felix Arnold (1996). This site appears to have been an open settlement on the outskirts of Itjy–tawy, growing over a cemetery. The ground plans of houses are similar but not identical to the houses of F/I, str. b/3–1 (Phases F–E/3–E/2) in Tell el–Dabʿa (Bietak 1996a: figs. 42–43; Bietak 2010a: fig. 15–16; M. Müller 2023). These structures are related to the so–called Kahun house (Ricke 1932: figs. 47–48; Bietak 1996b: 31–37, figs. 12–13) but exhibit a similar squat layout as the cited houses in Tell el–Dabʿa and date to the same period, the late 13th Dynasty **(Fig. 26)**.

A disparity between the Lisht–North houses and those of Tell el–Dabʿa is the absence of a room with a tomb, which was predominantly attached to the western façade of many houses at Tell el-Dabʿa (see Bietak 1996a: figs. 42–43; Bietak 2010a: fig. 15–16; M. Müller 2023, Übersichtspläne 4–5). Looking at the plans of the Lisht houses, it is noticeable that while some tomb shafts are concealed by house walls (Shafts 894, 895), most shafts from the late Middle Kingdom occupation are

[11] For the north–western Semitic origin of the name of King Khendjer of the 13th Dynasty, see Ryholt 1997: 220–221 with literature.

[12] Von Beckerath 1964: 52; Ryholt 1997: 221–222.

[13] Literature in: Di. Arnold 1988: 150; Do Arnold et al. 1995: n. 41; F. Arnold 1996: fn. 4.

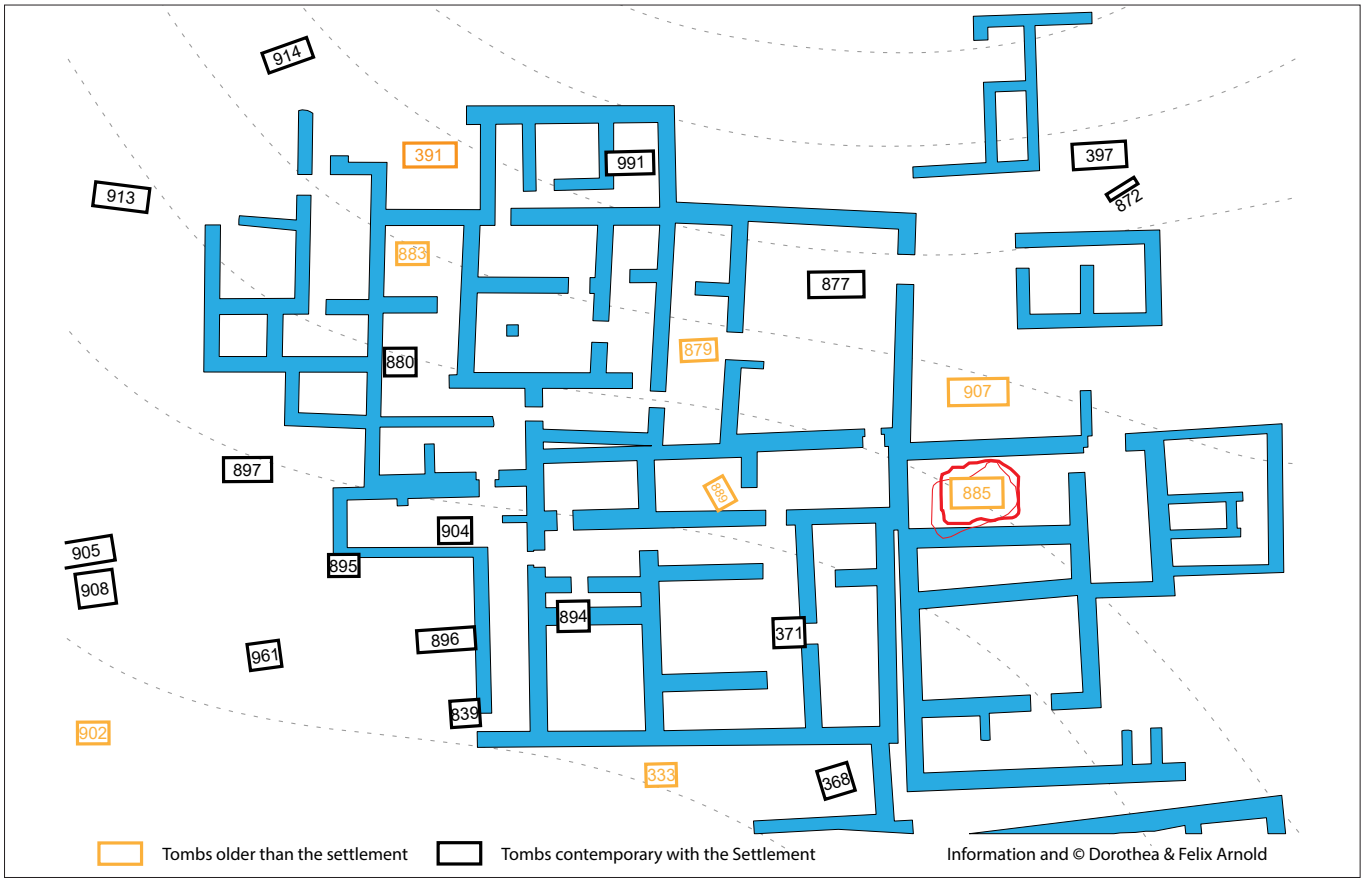


Fig. 26 Houses of the late 13th Dynasty in Lisht -North (after F. Arnold 1996: Fig. 5)

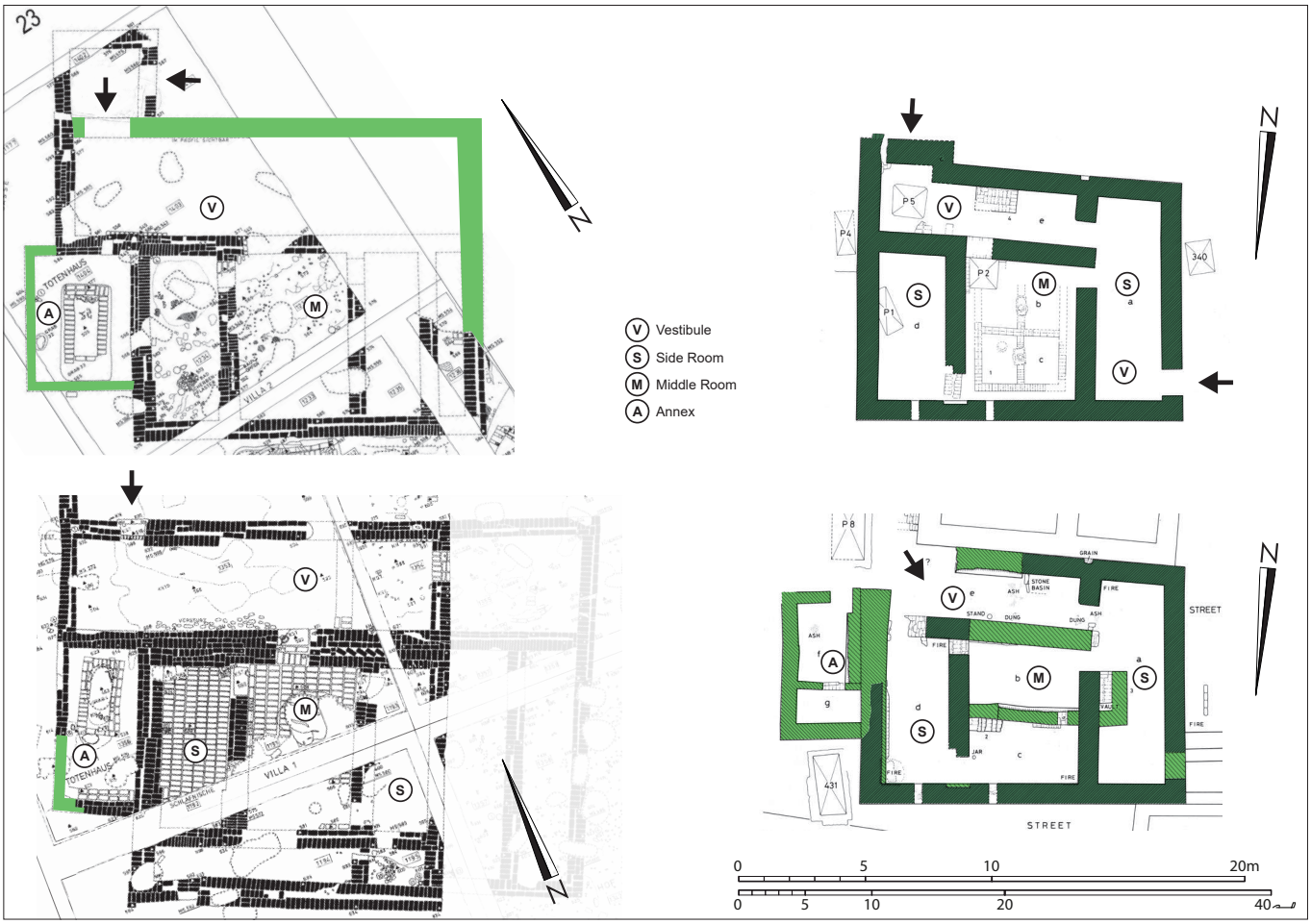


Fig. 27 Houses of the 14th Dynasty (Area F/I, Phase E/3) in Tell el-Dab'a at the left side (after Bietak 2010a: fig. 15) in comparison to houses in Lisht at the right side (after Arnold 1996, figs. 54-55)

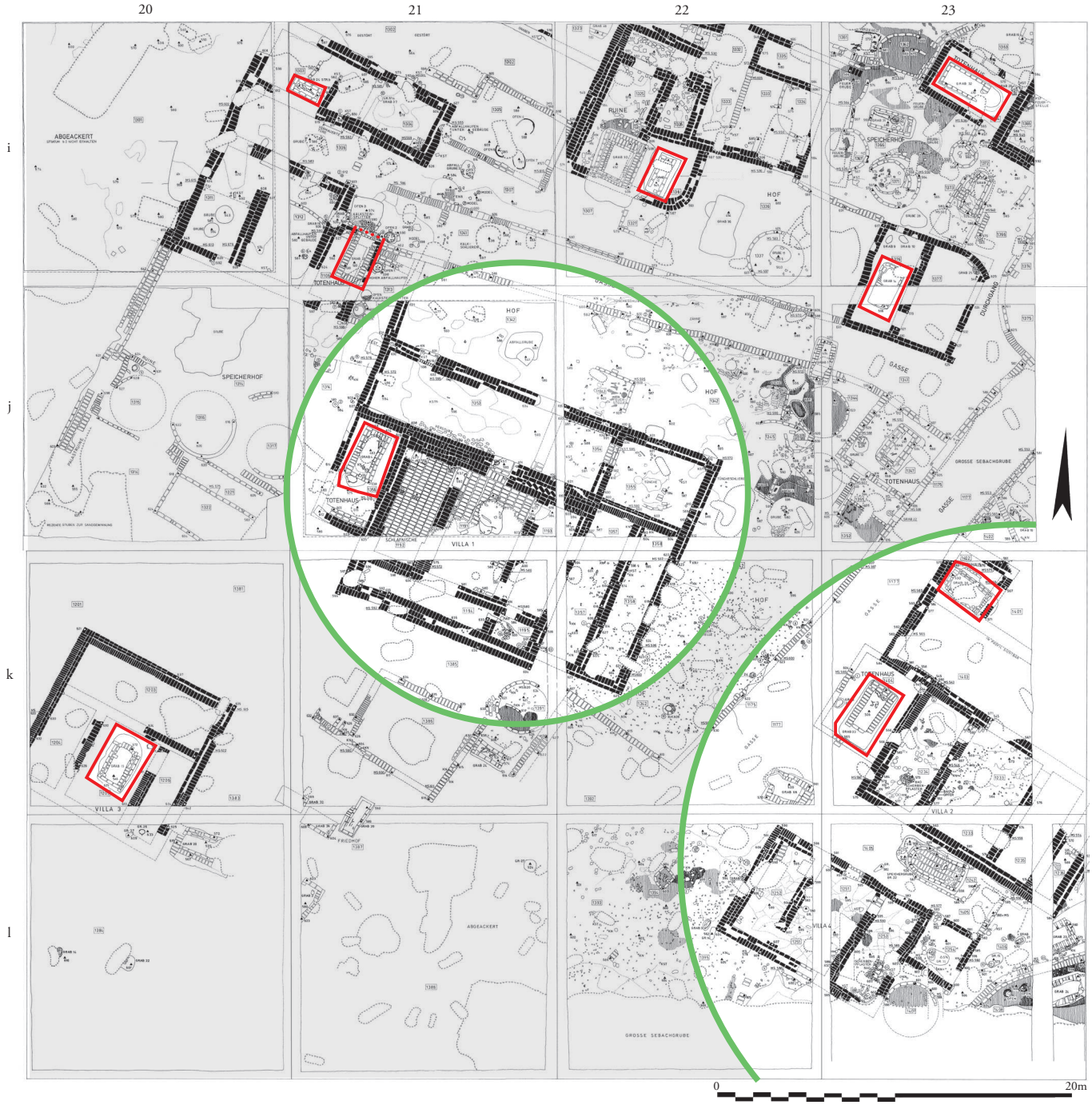


Fig. 28 Houses in Tell el-Dab'a Area F/I, Phase E3, with intramural burials. (© M. Bietak)

positioned within rooms centres, away from the walls **(Fig. 27)**.[14] We have evidence for this situation at Tell el–Dab'a in Phase F (Bietak 1996b: fig. 15, squ. i/21, 22, 23, k/20) **(Fig. 28)**.

Furthermore, the famous "Lisht jar", adorned with incised bird motifs from shaft 879, belongs to a family of juglets and jars characterised by highly stylised avian designs that date to Phases F–E/2 in the 14th Dynasty at Tell el–Dab'a (= Lisht late 13th Dynasty). This particular variant, featuring birds with black burnished bodies, appears to have been crafted in a Byblos workshop (Bietak & Kopetzky 2009 with literature).[15] As this precious jug is from shaft 879, it must, therefore, be a grave offering. Tell el–Yahudiya Ware piriform 1c juglets were recovered from the same tomb, dating to Phase E/3 at Tell el–Dab'a (Kemp & Merrillees 1980: pl. 31 above).[16]

[14] I would like to thank Dieter and Dorothea Arnold for providing clarification on this matter.

[15] See the findings of related ware from Sidon, especially the Dolphin crater: Doumet–Serhal 2008: 12–15; Doumet–Serhal 2013: 133–134; Doumet–Serhal & Boschloos 2021: 226, figs 5–6.

[16] See also similar finds from the El–Lisht settlement: Kemp & Merrillees 1980: pl. 3/4, 6,10, pl. 6 below.

Hence, the houses, the shaft, and likely other shafts, are contemporaneous. Within these houses, small altars and three stelae were also found, a context that aligns with a domestic setting if these items were associated with an ancestor cult. Felix Arnold further provides evidence that the shaft containing the "Dolphin" jug corresponds to the house in which it was dug (F. Arnold 1996: 16–17, n. 24). In a different house (A3.3), a vault was constructed within western Room A (Fig. 22 below), which may have served as a tomb chamber or a cellar (F. Arnold 1996: fig. 5).

Consequently, some evidence emerges from El–Lisht–North regarding intramural burials coupled with Levantine pottery. We may posit that people of Western Asiatic origin inhabited this area, as Egyptian burials typically occurred in cemeteries outside settlements.

In the town of El–Lahun (also: Illahun, Kahun), ceramics dating to Middle Bronze Age IIA were also found, although of uncertain origin (Petrie 1891: 9–15, pl. I/11,14, 16, 17, 19). Additionally, Levantine Painted Ware, Tell el Yahudiya Ware of piriform 1b and 1c typology (Petrie 1891: pl. I/17, 20, 21), and juglets with a painted pattern were discovered, including one with a Cilician type garland (Petrie 1891: pl. I/11), Middle Minoan pottery (Petrie 1891: pl. I/1–10, 12, 13, 15), as well as White Painted III–IV class Middle Cypriot pottery (Petrie 1891: pl. I/18). These findings likely originated from tombs at this site, indicating the presence of adult intramural burials.

In Abu Ghurab, three Middle Bronze Age toggle pins were found in New Kingdom deposits (Petrie 1891: 19, pl. XXII/1–3). They are typical of Middle Bronze Age culture and were surely not used by Egyptians. In all likelihood, they were originally tomb deposits or were lost by their owners in a nearby settlement. The horse– or donkey–bit from the same collection (Petrie 1891: pl. XXII/30) could be from the New Kingdom, although similar horse–bits are also known from the Second Intermediate Period.[17]

Among the grave goods from the 12th–13th Dynasty necropolis at Harageh, 5 km east of the town of El–Lahun (Engelbach & Gunn 1923: pl. XLI/ 99 D, F, J, S; Kemp & Merrillees 1980: 35–39, figs. 14–16), there are notable finds such as an unusual Levantine Painted Ware dipper jug and three distinct Tell el–Yahudiya juglets of piriform 1c and round–bottom shapes. These items exhibit strong parallels with those from Phases E/3 and E/3–2 at Tell el–Dab'a. The Harageh site is without doubt the cemetery of the El–Lahun town.

The ceramic finds, by themselves, cannot serve as definitive evidence of the presence of people of Asiatic origin in this region. However, the toggle pins and intramural burials are ethnic markers. Toggle pins are part of the Western Asiatic dress code (recently Prell 2020), and they only make sense in this region if they were originally used by people who adhered to this particular fashion. The aforementioned pottery aligns with the timeline of similar wares found in Phase E/3 tombs at Tell el–Dab'a, a timeframe corresponding to the second part of the 14th Dynasty.

The golden jewellery discovered in select tombs at Harageh is particularly interesting. Notably, the shell–shaped golden pendants (Engelbach & Gunn 1923: pls XIV/4–5, XXIII/154/72) also have parallels at Tell el–Dab'a (Bietak 1922: fig. 6). These items can be considered as booty obtained from the looting of elite necropoleis in the Memphite area and Middle Egypt (Kopetzky 2019/2020; Ahrens & Kopetzky 2021; Bietak 2022).

Given the cessation of the Lisht–North settlement by the late 13th Dynasty or the early the Hyksos Period, the temporary abandonment of the Kom Rabi'a (RAT) settlement, and the concurrent expansion of Tell el–Dab'a / Avaris and other Eastern Delta sites, one can draw a convincing conclusion—as Felix Arnold has (1996: 19)—that a demographic shift to the Delta occurred during the Second Intermediate Period.

This logical conclusion stems from the significant presence of the Asiatic community, residing in close proximity to the 13th Dynasty capital, Itjy–tawy. Occupying positions of power, they might have orchestrated the downfall of the 13th Dynasty. Their familiarity with the region's topography empowered their mob to plunder the elite necropoleis of the Memphite region, including its royal tombs (Kopetzky 2019/20; Ahrens & Kopetzky 2021; Bietak 2022), where they left graffiti in the subterranean system of the pyramid of Senwosret III (de Morgan 1903: 93–96, fig. 137–140; Di. Arnold 2002: pl. 24–26; Do. Arnold 2010: 200–206, figs 3–5). The prestigious spoils were traded with the 14th Dynasty, who exported them to royal courts in the

[17] For literature about horse– and donkey–bits in the Levant see Way 2011, 121, fn.112; for a well dated donkey–bit from the Middle Bronze Age see Bar-Oz et al. 2013, 4, fig. 4.

Levant (Kopetzky 2019/2020; Ahrens & Kopetzky 2021; Bietak 2022), before the carriers of the 15th Dynasty moved to Avaris and the eastern Delta and wrested control of Lower Egypt. These people may have hailed from the same lineage as the 12th to 14th Dynasty inhabitants of Avaris, but they could have also assimilated immigrants from an older era. Perhaps we shall never know. Nonetheless, they sported the same mushroom–shaped coiffure as the statues of dignitaries found at Tell el–Dab'a, a feature also depicted in the graffiti of Senwosret III's pyramid.

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