



Perunefer: the principal New Kingdom naval base

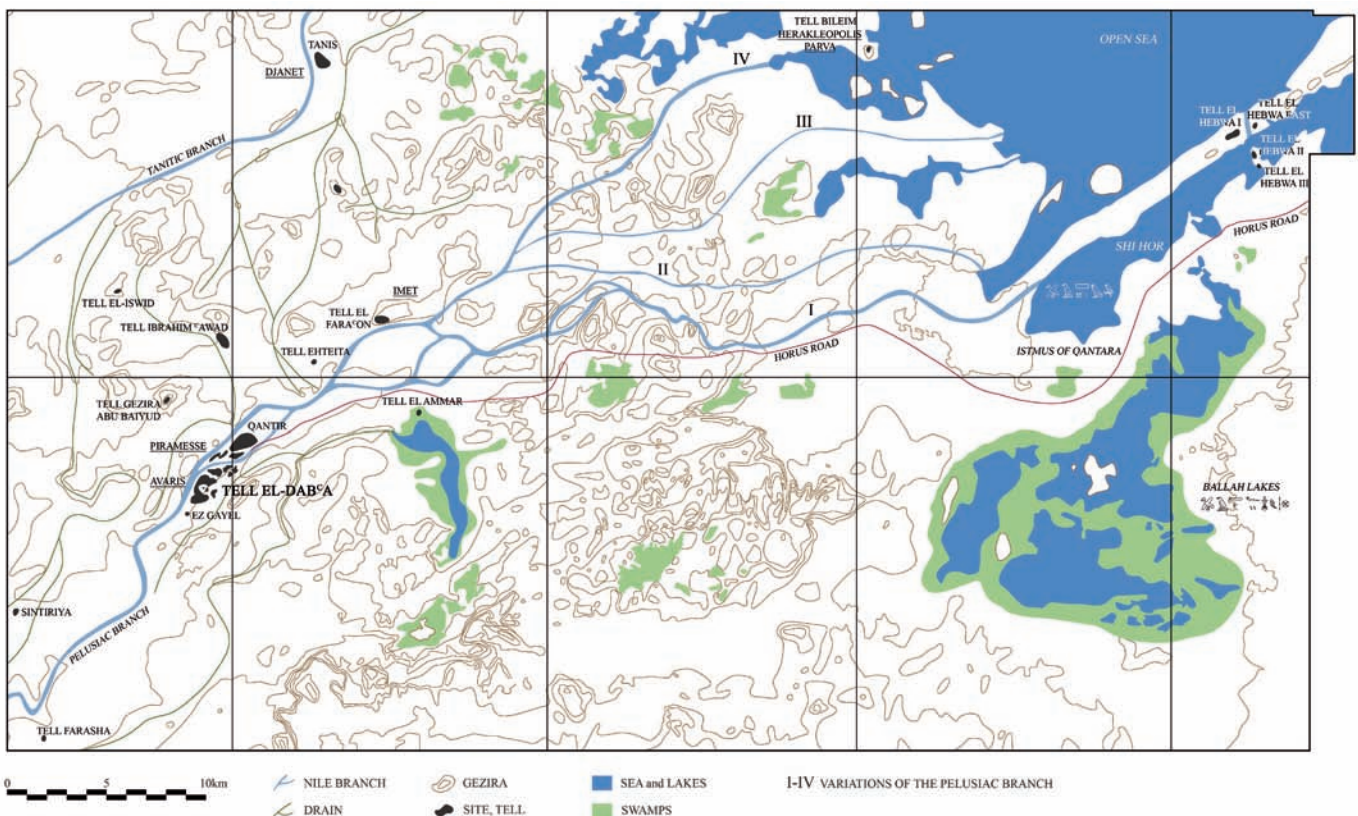
In *EA* 26 (pp.13-17) **Manfred Bietak** proposed that the location of the ancient naval base of Perunefer should be sought at Tell el-Daba/Ezbet Helmy. Recent geophysical investigations at the site provide additional support for this theory.

In my previous *Egyptian Archaeology* article, I proposed that the site of Perunefer should be identified with Tell el-Daba/Ezbet Helmy without committing myself to topographic reasoning. Wilhelm Spiegelberg, Georges Daressy and others had already, in the late 1920s, put forward reasons to locate this major naval base of Tuthmosis III and Amenhotep II in the Delta, in particular at the site of the later city of Piriamesse, because of the presence there of Canaanite cults and the naval and military functions of both Perunefer and Piriamesse. Labib Habachi, in the 1950s, endorsed this view and located Perunefer at Tell el-Daba and Qantir, which he identified with Avaris and Piriamesse. The identification of Tell el-Daba/Qantir with Avaris/Piriamesse has now been proved by the excavations of the Austrian Institute and the Pelizaeus Museum, Hildesheim, respectively. However, crucially for the possible identification with Perunefer, Eighteenth Dynasty remains were missing from the site.

This changed dramatically with the discovery of military installations from the early Eighteenth Dynasty and a 13

acre palace precinct of royal dimensions from the time of Tuthmosis III and Amenhotep II, with Minoan wall paintings (see *EA* 2, pp.26-28, and *EA* 3, pp.27-29). In the meantime geomagnetic surveys (see further this issue, pp.10-13) revealed two huge harbour basins. The identification of the basins as harbours was proved through sediment-analysis by the paleogeographers Jean-Philippe Goiran (CNRS) and Hervé Tronchère (Maison d'Orient, University of Lyon), who are specialists in the study of ancient harbours. Harbour 1 must have been quite busy because it had a separate access canal from, and an outlet back to, the Nile. This harbour could have accommodated hundreds of ships.

At present it is difficult to date the harbours. It seems, however, significant that the straight northern edge of harbour 1 is parallel to a fortification wall of the time of Horemheb, which covered the access canal. This shows that the basin was still visible in his reign and must predate it, but the harbour could have also remained in use during his reign if the outlet was used as an access canal.



The locations of Avaris and Piriamesse in the ancient landscape of the eastern Delta



The palace precinct of the Tuthmosid Period at Tell el-Daba/Ezbt Helmy

The second harbour was situated just beside a recently discovered Hyksos palace, probably belonging to Khyan, which hints at its date. It was created within a defunct Nile channel, which had probably left behind a seasonal lake. Such waters could easily have been enlarged and dredged in order to serve as a harbour. On his second stela King Kamose of the Seventeenth Dynasty boasted of having destroyed hundreds of ships at Avaris, requiring the location at the site of an appropriately large harbour. The southern basin, if not both harbours 1 and 2, could have served this function.

The harbours must have remained in use during the Nineteenth Dynasty. According to Papyrus Anastasi III, 7, 5-6, Piramesse was the marshalling place of 'thy (the pharaoh's) chariotry, the mustering place of thy army, the mooring place of thy ships' troops' (Ricardo Caminos' translation). According to inscriptions on *naos* doors, now in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, in the Twentieth Dynasty Avaris was still a harbour, if not the harbour, of Piramesse. A special temple for Amun was dedicated to this place. After the discovery of the Eighteenth Dynasty installations and the harbour basins it is, therefore, logical to assume that this site served as a major harbour during the period in between - the Eighteenth Dynasty.

Not many ancient Egyptian harbours have been identified by archaeological investigations. What we know is that the typical ones were accommodated within basins with access to the river, such as the harbour of Amenhotep III at Malqata, the mooring places in front of temples, and the basin within the Serra East fortress. Such installations offered better control of, and protection for, ships against strong currents, unexpected high tides, or aggressors. The harbours discovered at the site of ancient Avaris conform absolutely to the concept of ancient Egyptian harbours.

The localisation of Perunefer in the Delta, especially at the ancient site of Avaris/Piramesse, was received with caution (see David Jeffreys' article in *EA* 28, pp.36-37).

Most Egyptologists would locate this naval base near Memphis and, indeed, texts would seem to support such an identification. There is evidence of much activity of Amenhotep II in Memphis: he is the main pharaoh associated with Perunefer and known to have fostered Canaanite cults. From his period is known a rock stela in Tura with Astarte as mistress of Perunefer depicted with Memphite gods. In the so-called 'Astarte papyrus' she is addressed as 'daughter of Ptah'. From the later New Kingdom we know of a tomb of a First Prophet of Amun of Perunefer with the name Sarabiyahina, also, at Saqqara, a Prophet of Baal and Astarte. Special note must be made of the Nineteenth Dynasty Papyrus Sallier IV (vs.1.3-6), which lists in a model letter the gods of Memphis, including gods to be associated with Perunefer. Among them is Amun with the epithet 'the great ram (?) of Perunefer' and some Canaanite gods such as Baalat, Qudshu, Inyt (*sic*) and Baal-Zephon. They may all be considered as gods of Perunefer because Papyrus St. Petersburg 1116A (vs. 42) from the reign of Amenhotep II mentions Canaanite cults in Perunefer. So everything seems to fall into place for a Memphite location for Perunefer.

However, none of those texts and arguments can be considered as cogent evidence for the localisation of Perunefer at Memphis. Memphis was the old capital of Egypt and was surely used as residence by the Tuthmosid kings, with Thebes remaining the spiritual capital. It would, therefore, not be surprising if Canaanite cults had been established in Memphis together with cults of gods from different regions in the country considered important for Memphis as a *de facto* residence. There is, however, also another chronological consideration that should be taken into account.

The first installation of Canaanite cults in Memphis seems to have happened under Amenhotep II and a natural assumption would be that they came to an end in the Amarna Period. Afterwards the focus of attention shifted to Piramesse. Merenptah, however, to some extent moved the capital city back to Memphis and this may have brought about a resurgence of Canaanite cults there. If Papyrus Sallier IV, which lists the Canaanite cults, dates not from the late reign of Ramesses II (*terminus post quem* year 56 of Ramesses II) but a few years later, from the reign of Merenptah, when Piramesse was abandoned as a residence and the court withdrew to the old capital Memphis, it would be understandable that affiliation cults of the gods of Perunefer, resident in Piramesse, were reestablished in Memphis in order to keep the favours of those gods. But in the list of divinities of Papyrus Sallier IV there are also other important gods originally from other places. Of special interest in this context is the god Sopdu from the eastern Delta, who is listed immediately after the Canaanite gods in what seems to be a list of cult topography of the eastern Delta. Memphis as a residence may explain also the presence of troops and foreigners,



among them the Asiatics 'who feel well' there.

It is, however, the physical nature of the Nile and strategic considerations that render the location of the naval base of Perunefer at Memphis improbable. In the dry season from March to June the Nile, according to all statistical records, shrinks to one fifth of its normal volume. Before the construction of the barrages, according to the records of the *Description de l'Égypte*, vol. 11, 'Pendant les derniers temps du décroissement du fleuve, c'est-à-dire pendant quatre à cinq mois de l'année, depuis janvier jusqu'à la fin de juin, le Nil est peu navigable ... la navigation est presque nulle'.

Aramaic custom accounts from the fifth century BC inform us that there was no seagoing navigation in January and February. This would limit the function of Memphis as a harbour for seagoing ships to only half the year, which would not have been acceptable for the position of the most important naval base of the belligerent Tuthmosid kings. Having the country's major harbour situated more than 100 miles upstream would also delay any necessary naval reaction. Strategies to defend the easternmost river mouth nearest to the major zone of conflict demanded a position nearer to the sea.

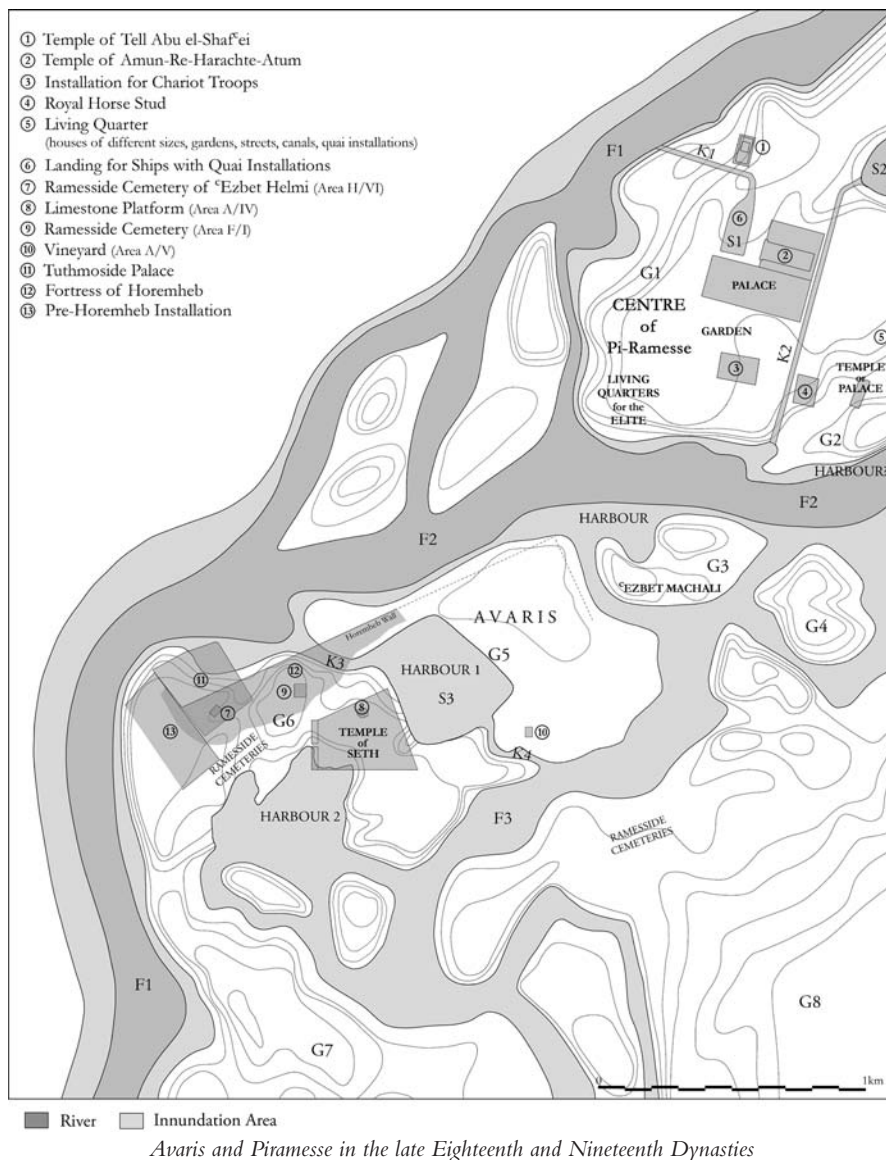
Seagoing harbours in deltaic landscapes are normally situated 5–40km upstream, offering protection against storms and easy access to the sea. This is necessary to enter and exit the port in periods of low river levels. At Tell el-Daba/Ezbet Helmy the average surface level of the Eighteenth Dynasty is 3.5m to 4m with foundations reaching down c.1m above the present Mediterranean sea level. It may be expected that the flood normally remained below this level. Even if the level of the sea during the Eighteenth Dynasty may have been 1–2m lower than at present, the river channels must have been filled, or mixed, with Mediterranean water, especially in periods of drought. Evidence of fish that thrive in brackish water, such as *dorados*, gives an idea of the quality of water at the site. Future research on the micro fauna of the river and harbour sediments will yield more precise results.

In summary, the environmental and the archaeological remains of the site support very strongly the identification of Tell el-Daba/Ezbet Helmy with the naval and military base of Perunefer. The site fills a continuum of harbour, residential and cult history from the Hyksos Period with the capital at Avaris until the Ramesside Period, when the

capital was at Piramesse. Additionally, it explains the continuity of near eastern cults and the iconography of the god Seth/Baal of Avaris from the Second Intermediate Period through to the Nineteenth Dynasty, when Seth became the ancestral god of the Ramesside kings.

Another important matter is the stratigraphy, which shows the abandonment of the site of Tell el-Daba/Ezbet Helmy after the reign of Amenhotep II and its reactivation in the late Eighteenth Dynasty. This evidence is reflected in the texts, which mention Perunefer in the time of Amenhotep II, followed by a period of silence before it reappears in the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties. Finally, the name Perunefer may be translated as 'the good going forth' or 'the good exit', a wish that makes sense when ships could set sail only with the help of the sea during periods when river levels were low.

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Avaris and Piramesse in the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties