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Strangers in Egypt

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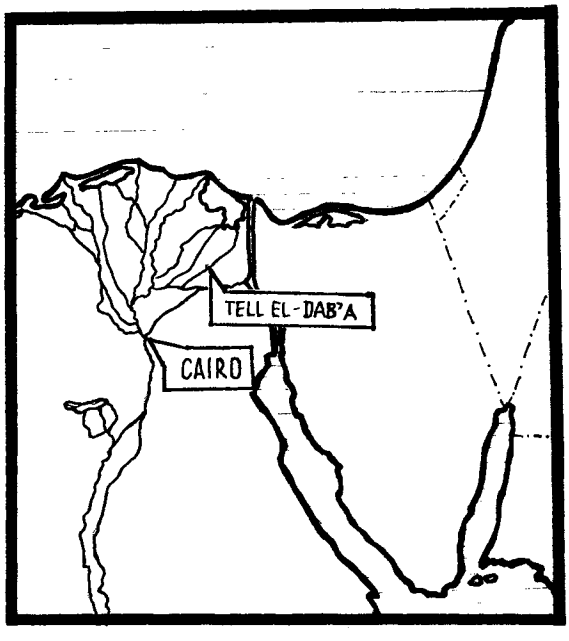
Dear Peter,

Professor Manfred Bietak, the director of the Austrian Archaeological Institute in Cairo, is both a symbol and a spokesman for the younger generation of archaeologists working in Egypt today. As I learned on my recent trip there, Bietak has established a reputation among his colleagues as an innovative and influential scholar, whose economic and cultural approach to ancient Egyptian civilization has already achieved striking results. When I met with him last month in his office in Cairo, he and his staff were preparing for their 15th season of excavations in the eastern Nile delta. And after listening to his assessment of his dig's goals and significance, I came away with the impression that Manfred Bietak's brand of archaeology is as revealing about the role of foreigners in the modern economy and culture of Egypt as it is useful for explaining Egypt's past.



Tell el-Dab'a, the scene of the Austrian excavations, is a massive, 10 km^2 mound of superimposed settlement levels, cemeteries, palaces, and temples located on the outskirts of the modern town of Qantir. In ancient times, this part of the delta was Egypt's most vulnerable border, a region that permitted easy access by outsiders into Egypt along the eastern, or Pelusiac branch of the Nile. The possibility of learning more about the nature of this cultural and economic interaction is Bietak's main reason for digging at Tell el-Dab'a; it is the site of the ancient city of Avaris, the capital of one of the most mysterious groups of outsiders ever to penetrate the border-- the foreign "Hyksos" kings of Egypt, who ruled from c. 1674 to c. 1552 BC.

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According to the 3rd-century-BC Egyptian historian Manetho, the Hyksos were a race of foreign invaders (in the preserved versions of his writings, they are described variously as Arabs, Phoenicians, or Judeans) who conquered the major cities of Egypt, destroyed the most ancient and venerated temples, and killed large numbers of the local population. During the successive reigns of six Hyksos kings, they held Egypt under oppression until they were finally defeated in battle and expelled from the country by a native Egyptian dynasty from Thebes. The barbaric reputation of the Hyksos was reinforced by Manetho's mistranslation of their ancient name (Hq3 h3swt in hieroglyphics) as "Shepherd Kings" instead of the more neutral "Rulers of Foreign Countries" on which modern scholars now agree.

Studies of the Hyksos in the late 19th century changed their racial identification to Indo-Aryan warlords, Syrian princes, or even the Biblical patriarchs, but they altered the Manethonian libel only in degree. At a time when racial explanations for history were fashionable, the scholars explained that, as in the case of the fall of the Roman Empire and the later Muslim Conquests, a barbaric yet "vigorous" people overwhelmed a sophisticated society in decline. Manfred Bietak believes that the time has come to overturn this outdated conception of history. His excavations at the Hyksos capital have convinced him that the phenomenon of Hyksos rule was a natural development of trends within Egyptian society and that the Hyksos "conquest" of Egypt can be explained as easily in cultural and economic terms as their "fall."

"The real processes of history," Bietak told me, "are more complex than political concepts," and he went on to explain that he now believes that the traditional view of the Hyksos as hated foreigners was merely a work of political propaganda developed by the subsequent Egyptian dynasties to explain away the true circumstances of Hyksos rule. Xenophobia may have been as effective a political tool in antiquity as it is in the present, but Bietak argues persuasively that for modern scholars to take it at face value betrays an unsophisticated approach to the mechanics of history.

It's not difficult to understand why Bietak has a natural distrust of political explanations for historical changes; he began his professional career in Egypt in the early 1960's on the Aswan High Dam Rescue Project, a massive scientific undertaking that is now recognized as a turning point in Egyptian archaeology. While earlier foreign expeditions had concentrated primarily on monumental architecture, museum-quality artifacts, and hieroglyphic inscriptions, the scholars from 40 nations who came to Egypt under UNESCO auspices had no such luxury in their choice of finds. Racing against the rising waters of Lake Nasser, they mapped, excavated, and studied

hundreds os ancient remains, ranging from the gigantic temple of Abu Simbel to nearly invisible Stone Age campsites, in an attempt to recover as much archaeological information as possible in the shortest time.

Bietak's part in this project, undertaken as a part of the Austrian contribution, was to map and excavate ancient Nubian settlements and cemeteries along the desolate gorge of the Nile Valley as it wound its way toward the border with Sudan. The archaeological challenge was enormous, since only limited work had been done by earlier scholars on the rise and development of Nubian culture as an independent entity. Bietak's predecessors had concentrated primarily on the region's connection to Egypt as a source of manpower and valuable raw materials, and in that sense they had shared ancient Egypt's imperialistic viewpoint. But Bietak succeeded in establishing the first comprehensive reconstruction of this African civilization, which he could never have accomplished by relying on the scattered references to raids, trade missions, and conquests in Nubia recorded in ancient Egyptian history. By tracing the appearance and distribution of distinctive artifacts in Nubian settlement levels and cemeteries, he was able to show how the movements of people, products, and ideas-- not only the political and military policies of the kings of Egypt-- affected the course of Nubia's history.

Twenty years have passed since Bietak ended his work in southern Egypt and yet his archaeological approach to the question of the Hyksos at Tell el-Dab'a is essentially the same. Although the written sources on the history of the Hyksos are relatively abundant, he has relied primarily on his archaeological finds. From the start of the excavations, Bietak's strategy was to discover the economic and cultural function of the Hyksos capital and then to draw broader historical conclusions about the Hyksos themselves. Not unexpectedly, Bietak's reconstruction is a radical departure from all previous theories. Instead of finding a huge encampment of warlike invaders, Bietak and his excavation team have uncovered the remains of a flourishing, expanding community of merchants and craftsmen whose prosperity was based not on warfare, but on peaceful interaction through trade.

According to the accepted chronology, the Hyksos domination of Egypt began around 1674 BC, but Bietak believes that the chain of events that made the Hyksos take-over inevitable began long before that date. The earliest settlement at Tell el-Dab'a, founded around 2000 BC, was thoroughly Egyptian in its pottery and architecture, and, according to Bietak, it had the character of a military outpost, probably established by the Egyptian kings of the XIth Dynasty to guard the eastern approaches of the Nile delta from incursions

by the nomads of northern Sinai. Two hundred years later, long after the garrison had been abandoned, the natural advantages of the location brought a new wave of settlers, who practiced a different way of life. In the remains of the mudbrick houses of this and the succeeding levels, the Austrian excavation team discovered molds and crucibles for metal working and thousands of fragments of distinctively shaped storejars, known from contemporary Egyptian wall paintings to have contained imported oil and wine. The source of these storejars was the eastern Mediterranean coast-- the area of modern Lebanon and Israel-- and Bietak believes that the establishment of this foreign trading colony was sanctioned and possibly even encouraged by the Egyptians themselves.

From small finds often come important historical evidence, and Bietak has made the most of a tiny cylinder seal, found on the floor of a large public building, which, from its groundplan seems likely to have been the headquarters of a local Egyptian governor. The seal, less than 1" in length and only ½" in diameter, served as an official stamp of ownership or authority when it was rolled across the wet clay sealings of documents or jars. Its presence in the Egyptian administration building is as significant as the elaborate design carved into its surface: the striding figure of Baal Zaphon, the storm god of the Phoenician pantheon, shown protecting a sailing ship.

Like many modern archaeologists, Bietak has a fascination with statistical speculations, and he has estimated on the basis of pottery fragments recovered from the areas already excavated, that the ruins of the ancient city of Avaris may contain fragments of as many as 2 million imported storejars. In the three centuries from 1800 to 1500 BC, which would lead up to and culminate in the Hyksos period, Bietak believes that there was an uninterrupted trade in imported commodities, of which the storejars that happened to be broken or left at the Nile delta port-of-arrival were only a small part. Since virtually no trace of overland commerce during this period has been found in extensive archaeological surveys along the northern coast of Sinai, Bietak is convinced that maritime trade, not overland immigration or warfare, is the key to understanding the Hyksos' rise to power.

If it weren't for an uncanny archaeological coincidence, it might have been difficult for Bietak to win many converts to his new theory of Hyksos origins. As earlier excavations on the coast of Lebanon had revealed, the flourishing port city of Byblos, which had been the source of many of Avaris' trade goods, entered a catastrophic economic decline around 1720 BC. Whether the cause was the expansion of the neighboring kingdom of Yamkhad (on the site of modern Aleppo) and the disruption of Byblos' traditional trade routes, or whether the cause was serious internal disturbances, Byblos en-

tered what Bietak describes as an "archaeological blackout." The rich tombs of the nobles of the city were plundered and abandoned, construction suddenly ended, and the population shrank. A Beirut of the 18th century BC? Bietak believes that was the approximate state of affairs. And the sudden appearance of a new wave of immigrants to Avaris at precisely the same time-- wealthy immigrants who established impressive cemeteries and Syro-Phoenician-style temples-- seems to Bietak to be evidence that the original trading colony was now augmented by the arrival of upper-class merchants who had fled from their original homeland and who subsequently made Avaris their permanent base.

The groundwork had been laid during the previous 80 years of lucrative commerce. The increasing dependence of the Egyptians on the trading services of foreigners had encouraged those foreigners, in times of economic upheaval, to take advantage of the natural wealth of Egypt-- not as a trading partner-- but as the primary source of their economic strength. Here, the written records of the Egyptians finally matched the archaeological reality: with the decline of the XIIIth Egyptian Dynasty in the following century, the Hyksos, whose capital was Avaris, assumed political control of Egypt. But Bietak has shown that the match between archaeology and ancient records needs some reshaping. The Hyksos assumed political control of the country only after they had taken over its foreign trade. And they were not shaggy warriors; they were multi-national executives.

Bietak's work in Nubia in the early 1960's provided him with an archaeological tool to trace the extent of the Hyksos trading network, for at Avaris, he found characteristic Nubian pottery types. It was clear to him that the riches of Nubia that had once been directed into the coffers and tombs of the native kings of Egypt now fueled commercial enterprises of unprecedented scale and to previously uncharted areas. The discovery of Hyksos artifacts on the island of Cyprus and on Crete and Thera in the Aegean Sea had always puzzled scholars who had underestimated the economic basis of Hyksos rule. But Bietak's economic explanation has now explained the trading potential of a group of skillful international merchants whose free hand in Egypt enabled them to piece together a complex trading network that a strong central government in Egypt had prevented before.

There were, of course, weaknesses implicit to this trading network; for the Hyksos merchant princes to maintain their economic power, they had constantly to elicit and cultivate the co-operation of the local Egyptian population up the length of the Nile Valley to keep the trade routes open. Apparently the Thebans of Upper Egypt gradually tired of being middlemen. As Bietak discovered in

the latest Hyksos levels at Avaris, the previously common types of Nubian pottery suddenly disappeared. The city of Thebes, soon to be the capital of a resurrected, native Egyptian kingdom, was in a position to sever the connection between the Nile delta and Africa, and once that economic coup d'etat was accomplished, the Theban aristocracy skillfully persuaded the rest of Egypt that the military defeat and expulsion of the Hyksos was a patriotic crusade.

In fact, the expulsion of the Hyksos and their insidious foreign influence was, for centuries, celebrated as a triumph of Egyptian self-determination. But as Bietak now believes, the Hyksos' transformation of the Egyptian economy could never be undone. In the hands of the Theban kings of the XVIIIth Dynasty, the trading network established by the "Rulers of Foreign Countries" provided a great deal of the wealth of New Kingdom times. The extensive Egyptian trade with Cyprus, the Aegean, and the cities of the eastern Mediterranean coast was made possible by the commercial infrastructure established in the Hyksos period. Never again could Egypt separate itself from the outside world, and from that perspective, what was remembered by later Egyptians as an unpleasant interlude of outside domination was actually a mechanism of cultural and economic change.

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I came away from my meeting with Professor Bietak with copies of several articles he had written about various aspects of the Tell el-Dab'a dig. Most were technical discussions of dating systems and pottery analysis published in archaeological journals, but one of the articles he gave me seemed more significant than the rest. Written for a non-academic audience, it appeared in a recent issue of Marhaba, an Austrian trade journal published by the Verein zur Förderung österreichisch-arabischer Beziehungen, the "Society for Fostering Austrian-Arab Relations."

The magazine was filled with articles and interviews with Austrian businessmen and diplomats extolling their country's participation in commercial and industrial development projects throughout the Middle East. It's not surprising that the Austrian excavations at Tell el-Dab'a were considered worthy of publicity, yet the strange juxtaposition of subjects caught me slightly off guard. Wedged between an advertisement for advanced Austrian electric generators and and article on the importance of increasing Austrian exports to Oman was Manfred Bietak's report on his discoveries in the eastern Nile delta, entitled "Some News about Trade and Trade Warfare in Egypt and the Ancient Near East."

Best Regards,

Neil

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