Tell ed-Daba News Report
Ancient Avaris Amazes Again!

David M. Rohl

The Austrian Mission's excavations at Tell ed-Daba have been continuing on an annual basis since 1966, often with one season in spring and another in early autumn. It will be well known to ISIS members that the Field Director throughout this time has been Professor Manfred Bietak of the Austrian Institute of Egyptology, who recently delivered his ISIS Fellowship Lecture to a capacity audience at the British Museum in London.

Over the 25 years of investigating what is now accepted as the ancient city of Hutwaret (the biblical Avaris), the Austrian team have gained a well earned reputation amongst fellow archaeologists for their precise scientific excavation techniques and careful interpretation of the results. Those results have continued to surprise with spectacular regularity.

First was the discovery that this Eastern Delta city was founded (in the main Tell A area) during the late 12th Dynasty by a partly Western Asiatic population. These 'Canaanite' folk continued to occupy the site throughout the 13th Dynasty, burying their dead within the confines of large open courtyards surrounding (usually) two-roomed houses. Interments were often accompanied by sheep burials and sometimes the additional burials of pairs of equids. Tell A was then briefly abandoned following an epidemic or plague in the city (revealed by mass burial pits) before being reoccupied by a new group of Asians who constructed a typically 'Canaanite' temple enclosure at the site. Associated with this temple were rich warrior burials. Manfred believes that this stratum (E) marks the beginning of the Hyksos period with the next stratum (D) being contemporary with Manetho's 15th Dynasty of Hyksos kings.

Next came the unearthing of a palace (Area F), to the west of Tell A, which was dated to the same period as one of the earliest strata of the

The new excavation site at the village of Ezbehelmi - spring season 1991. Far left: the city defensive wall; centre: a garden with tree pits; and right: the site of the new discovery. [Photo: D. Rohl]
main tell (Tell A - str. G/4 = Area F - str. d/1). The palace was then abandoned following an attempt to repair it. The reasons for either this attempted restoration or the sudden abandonment are not yet known.

To the immediate south of the palace the Austrian team then found a cemetery of what appears to have been a dynasty of local dignitaries - perhaps to be identified with the ‘Overseers of the Foreign Countries’ known to have been in the service of the 13th Dynasty pharaohs.

Dr. Josef Dorner then undertook a major subsurface survey of the whole area using a series of drill cores. This fascinating work has revealed a complex waterway system around Avaris and the later city of Per-Ramesses. The major discovery was that to the west of Avaris the Pelusiac branch of the Nile divided into two arms - one continuing in a northerly direction, but the other sweeping around to the east immediately adjacent to the northern boundary of the Middle Bronze Age city. Other man-made waterways may have protected the southern and eastern sides of Avaris.

The one major difficulty in identifying Avaris with Tell ed-Daba and its environs had been that in 25 years of excavation no large city walls had been found. The problem was that in the famous Kamose Steleae the Theban pharaoh describes approaching high fortifications which protected the Hyksos capital. However, this issue has now been successfully resolved with the unearthing (in 1990) of a massive solid mudbrick defensive wall just to the east of the original main Pelusiac arm of the Nile, within the small agricultural village of Ezbet Helmi. It is in this area, some half-a-kilometre from the main tell, that the Austrian team has been concentrating in the last two years and where the spectacular discovery which is the main subject of this report has just been made.

During his brief stay in the UK for the 1991 ISIS Fellowship Lecture, Professor Bietak received a telegram from his colleagues who had remained in Egypt in order to complete the work of the 1991 spring season at Tell ed-Daba. The telegram simply said ‘Amazing discovery ... contact the Cairo office a.s.a.p.’. Manfred was unable to inform his ISIS audience as to what precisely had been found because he himself did not know at the time; a tantalising mystery indeed!

A section of the thick solid mudbrick fortification wall dated to the Hyksos period city of Avaris - Spring 1991. [Photo: D. Rohl]

It just so happened that I was going to Egypt with ISIS Trustee, Roy Spence, a week or so later - needless to say we paid a visit to Tell ed-Daba in the hope of seeing the final week's work in progress. When we arrived at the site we found to our surprise that Manfred was also on his way to Cairo to see for himself the important new discovery which his team had made. We were therefore privileged to be on the spot during the work to uncover the new find and, as a result, I was able to take a number of photographs - of which some are reproduced here.

Having kept you in suspense for long enough, I can now reveal that Professor Bietak has given the JACF permission to announce that the Austrian Mission at Tell ed-Daba has uncovered the fragmentary remains of a large number of Minoan wall paintings located just above the Hyksos strata at Ezbet Helmi. The paintings are similar to those found at Akrotiri, on the volcanic island of Thera, and the famous royal palace at Knossos on Crete. The evidence suggests that the vividly coloured Ezbet Helmi fragments were dumped at this location and may have originally come from a large palatial building of Hyksos date somewhere in the nearby, as yet unexcavated, fields. In the same season Dr. Dorner also found similar fragments near an irrigation canal several hundred metres to the east of Ezbet Helmi. This secondary find was associated with stone column bases and may provide a clue as to the location of the 'palace'.
Included in the fragments so far unearthed are:
(a) three fragments of bull-leaping scenes (similar to the famous bull-leapers from Knossos); (b) the leg and sandaled foot of a male figure (the footwear is typically Minoan, as worn by the tribute bearers from Keftiu in 18th Dynasty Theban tomb-scenes - see page 39 of this Journal); (c) part of the head of a male figure with red/brown complexion and a tasseled fringe of black hair (typical of Cretan youth); (d) scenes of mountains with a scattering of brightly coloured vegetation (again similar to the naturalistic painted scenery from the houses of Akrotiri); (e) several fragments of female dress, and (f) a large black almond-shaped eye set in a pale complexion (see photo).

The discovery of these Minoan frescoes poses some new and intriguing questions for both Egyptologists and Aegean scholars alike. For instance: What were the influences of Minoan culture upon the Hyksos rulers of Egypt? How close was the trading relationship between these two Middle Bronze Age civilisations? Indeed, could the famous sea voyage scene (from the West House at Akrotiri) represent an overseas trading mission which included a visit to Avaris? If the unidentified north African (?) city located between two arms of a river delta (?) is indeed Avaris, then the painting shows the return leg of the voyage, setting off from Egypt and returning to Thera either via the major population centres of Crete or along the Levantine coast. Was there a substantial minority population of Minoans at ‘Canaanite’ Avaris and, if so, did they remain as residents of the city following the expulsion of their Hyksos overlords by the 18th Dynasty founder, Ahmose?

All these questions, and more, will now have to be addressed as a result of this new, spectacular discovery near the site of Tell ed-Daba. Hopefully the Austrian Mission’s excavations over the next few years will resolve many of the issues - we await the results with very great interest. In the meantime ISIS readers have the publication of Professor Bietak’s Fellowship Lecture to look forward to in JACF 5.

- D. M. Rohl

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**Excavating the Minoan frescoes during the last week of work at the village of Ezbet Helmi in May 1991. [Photo: D. Rohl]**

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**Fragments of fresco photographed in situ before being removed for conservation. [Photo: D. Rohl]**

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**Close-up of a plaster fragment apparently bearing a large eye (with eyebrow). [Photo: D. Rohl]**