

In the Bronze Age Tell el-Dab'a was Avaris, the capital of the Hyksos Dynasty which ruled Egypt from ca. 1650 to 1550 BC. The Hyksos were not native to Egypt, but apparently came from the Levant (the area of modern Lebanon and Israel). Their capital at Avaris included a large palace, gardens, and fortification walls. The Austrian Archaeological Institute, Cairo, has been conducting excavations at the site, under the direction of Manfred Bietak of the University of Vienna, and, in 1991, announced an unexpected find: hundreds of fragments of Minoan wall paintings, the first ever found in Egypt.

Dated to the end of the Hyksos Period (Late Minoan IA in Aegean chronology), these wall paintings are in fact older than the famous frescoes of the Palace of Minos at Knossos on Crete. While a complete report has not yet been published, the fragments from Avaris are said to depict typical "Minoan" motifs: there are three long-haired youths, dressed in kilts, jumping over the backs of bulls; there are women wearing traditional Minoan clothing; there are mountainous landscapes and lions and leopards in full gallop. There seems to be little doubt that these scenes were painted not by Hyksos, but by Minoan artists. This conclusion leads to the fascinating question of why Minoan artists were commissioned to decorate a Hyksos palace with motifs totally alien to the Hyksos culture.

Several theories have been advanced, mainly as a result of an international colloquium held to discuss these paintings in London, England, in 1992. While none have found general acceptance, one of the most intriguing suggestions was that one of the last Hyksos kings had married a Minoan princess; he then graciously built a palace for her which was decorated in traditional Minoan style by Minoan artists. [For this hypothesis, cf. "A Theban 'Battle Axe'" by V. Hankey, in *Minerva* 4 (1993) 13-14.] While such a scenario may strike some as overly romanticized, it is nevertheless probable that dynastic marriages between ruling families did take place in the Aegean Bronze Age. Given the well established links between Minoan Crete and Egypt, such marriages should not be ruled out.

In any event, the newly-found wall paintings indicate much closer ties between the Minoans and the Hyksos than ever before suspected, and thus have necessitated a "re-writing" of the history of this period. Whether all of the questions raised by this discovery will eventually be answered is hard to say: the site of Avaris was thoroughly destroyed in the aftermath of the victory of King Ahmose, the first ruler of the 18th Dynasty (the "New Kingdom"), over the Hyksos ca. 1567 BC. However, as the excavation at Tell el-Dab'a has shown, there is always the possibility that additional evidence of a Minoan presence in Hyksos Egypt will come to light at other contemporary sites. The search is on!

### Minoan Crete and Hyksos Egypt

by P.Y. Forsyth

That the Bronze Age Minoans of Crete had been in close contact with Pharaonic Egypt has been well known for many years: numerous Egyptian artefacts have been found during excavations on Crete, and in Egypt over 40 fragments of Minoan pottery have come to light. This has led most researchers to argue for extensive trade between Crete and Egypt in the Bronze Age. Recently, however, significant new finds in Egypt suggest an even closer tie: Minoans seem to have lived at the site now known as Tell el-Dab'a, located in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta.