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The setting of the Minoan wall paintings at Avaris¹

Manfred Bietak

In 1990 thousands of fragments of wall plaster with Minoan paintings were uncovered at 'Ezbet Helmi at Tell el Dab'a, the site of Avaris, the ancient capital of the Hyksos.² The paintings were not found *in situ*, but in dumps on top of gardens from the Hyksos period. Only after the continuation of the examination were the stratigraphic contexts properly understood.³ The dumps belong to a palatial district of the first part of the 18th Dynasty, to be dated more probably now to the early Tuthmoside period (1500–1450 BC).⁴ Their production could fall into the time of the reigns of Tuthmosis I and II and perhaps even into the time of the inception of intensive contacts between the Minoan Crete and Egypt, as highlighted by the Theban Tombs from the reigns of Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III, with representations of Keftiu delegations.⁵

The palatial compound of the early 18th Dynasty was constructed on top of the remains of a palace district of the Hyksos period and installations from the beginning of the 18th Dynasty (Str. e/1=Ph. D/1). It consists of a large palace (G) 431 cubits long and 150 cubits wide (FIG. 3.3), and a smaller palace (F) near the banks of the easternmost Nile branch (FIG. 3.5). Between the two a large courtyard of 150 cubits width is enclosed. South of the big palace (G) there is another small palace (J).

All three palaces were only preserved in their sub-structures with a construction in casemate fashion, which was filled up largely with brick and earth dumps to form platforms on which the palaces proper were constructed. All three palaces had ramps leading up to the first floor where the palatial rooms can be expected. The plans of palaces G and J can to some extent be reconstructed.⁶ The ramps and their landings lead to a nearly square courtyard, surrounded by column galleries. From the courtyard one enters a vestibule which leads to the reception hall with columns. Behind that lies the intimate part of the palace, which is more difficult to reconstruct. It usually consists of a small reception hall, a sleeping room, a bath, a robing room and other minor rooms and private store quarters.

More difficult to reconstruct is palace F, which shows differences from the other two buildings. Here the ramp and the landing at the northern side of the building lead up to a rectangular, not square, courtyard. The

square courtyard has a central position as in the Kahun House type B. Using this prototype a reconstruction was attempted with a reduced room programme. Here the central courtyard is square and could be reconstructed as a peristyle court. South of this the foundations can be read as providing for a vestibule; to the south the walls are set in casemate fashion and one could assume there existed a hall with four columns in the centre, a two columned hall towards its east and a small room at the west, most probably a sleeping room. The intimate part of the Kahun House or Amarna House, which usually follows south of the central reception room is missing. In three corners of the structures we find long narrow corridors, which are most probably foundations of stairs, leading to the roof.

The major part of the wall plaster fragments with figural motives came from palace F. The distribution of the fragments (FIG. 3.5) shows two concentrations. One dump was found at the base of the ramp and one to the north of the landing. Without doubt, the wall plaster was partly thrown down the landing of the ramp, partly carried down the ramps and deposited successively there towards the local north.

What has happened? The building material is not rock hard; the construction consists of massive brick walls on alluvial ground. I estimate the compaction process lasted over 15 years, based on my own practical experience in constructing excavation houses of mud-brick.

1 I would like to thank Lyvia Morgan for inviting me to contribute to this memorial volume and for her help in editing this paper. For the drawings of Tell el Dab'a I am indebted to Liza Majerus.

2 Literature on the site in Bietak 1996a, 90–8; 2001.

3 Bietak 2000c, 187–95; Bietak, Dorner and Jánosi 2001.

4 Literature: Bietak 1996a; 1996c; 1998; 1999; 2000c; 2001; Bietak, Dorner, Hein and Jánosi 1994; Bietak, Dorner and Jánosi 2001 (most detailed preliminary report); Jánosi 1994; 1995.

5 Synthesis: Wachsmann 1987.

6 Bietak, in Bietak, Dorner and Jánosi 2001, 76–8, fig. 34a–b; and Bietak forthcoming, fig. 10.

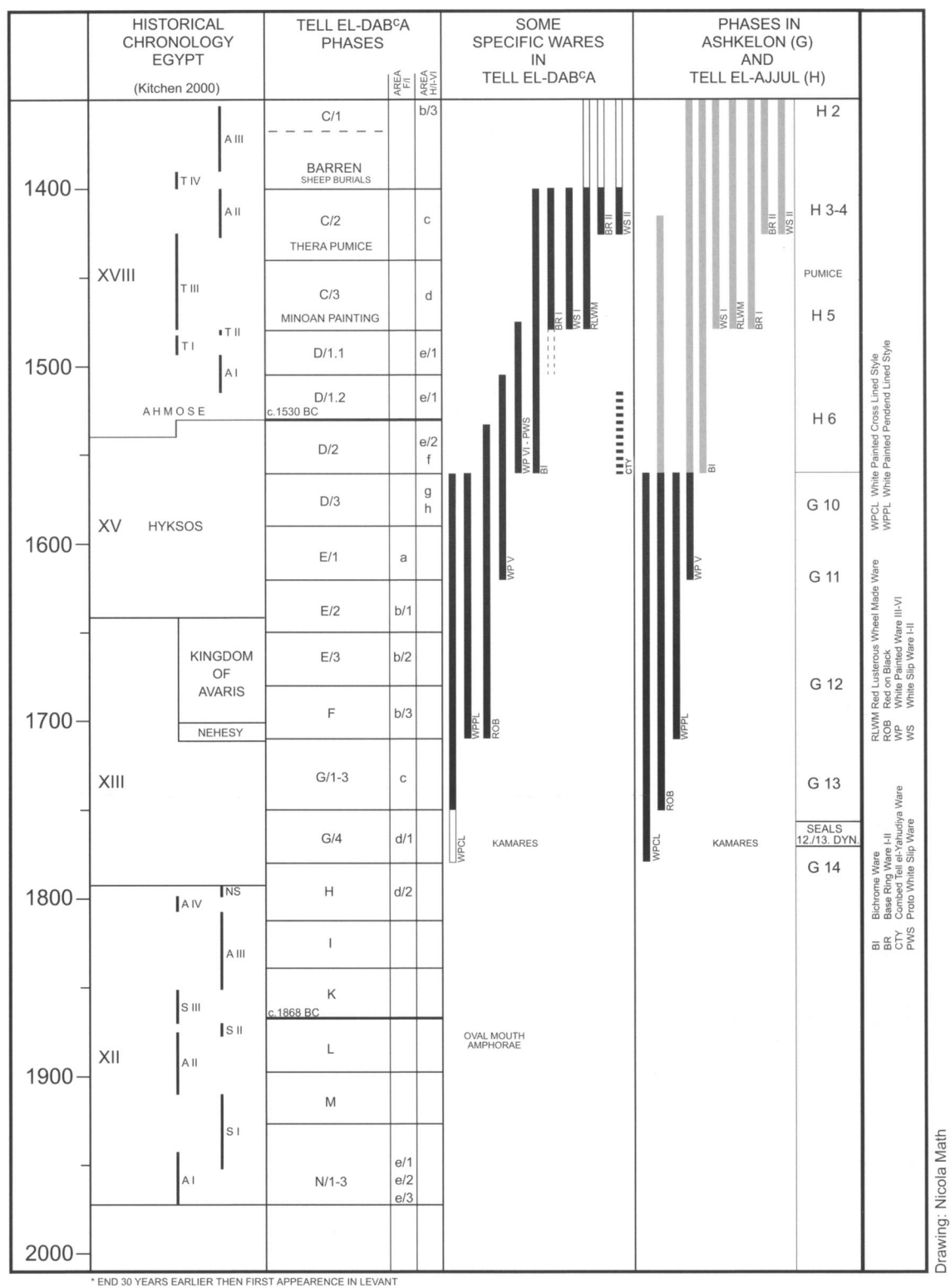


Fig. 3.2. Stratigraphy of Tell el Dab^a (after Bietak 2001).



Fig. 3.3. The Citadel of Tell el Dab'a in the early 18th Dynasty (geophysical survey of T. Herbich and C. Schweitzer 1999–2001).

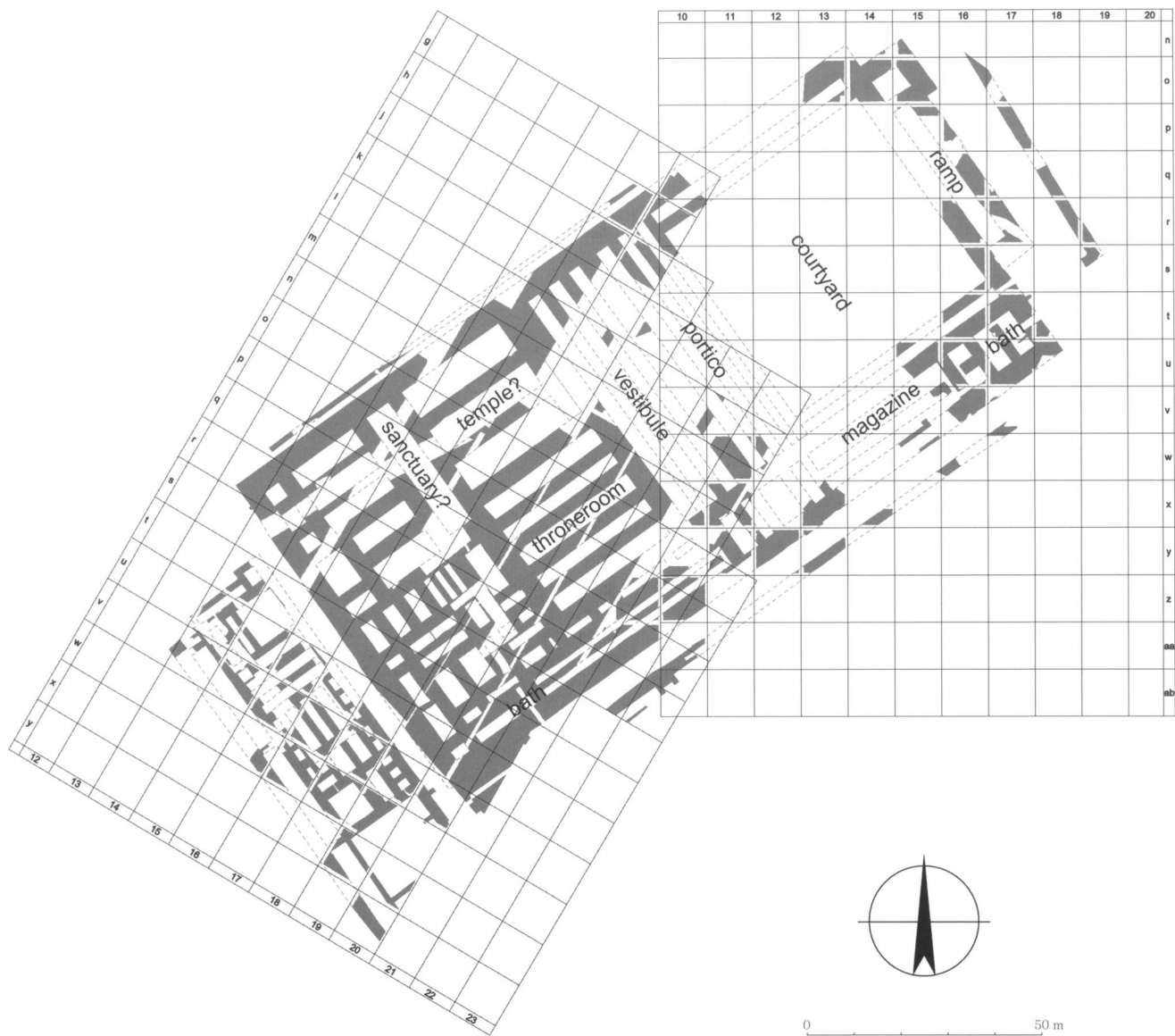


Fig. 3.4. Palace G with reconstruction of its room programme (illustration N. Math).

Walls of soft building material also need a soft coating such as a layer of mud, usually used by the ancient Egyptians for houses and palaces. The buildings of the Hyksos period in the lower strata had such white-washed wall-coating painted with Egyptian motifs. In our case hard plaster of lime was applied in the same technique as in the Minoan palaces.⁷ Hard plaster is, however, unelastic and must have fallen from the mud-brick walls the moment compaction set in. All the splendour of the paintings, therefore, quickly came down. Hard plaster, suitable for architecture with stone walls, or at least for walls with solid stone foundations on bedrock is unsuitable for mud-brick architecture on alluvial ground. Either the Aegean artists who executed the paintings were completely inexperienced with the

compaction problems of mud-brick architecture, or the paintings were only made for a specific occasion.

Two phases can be observed for the palace district. The paintings belonged to the earlier phase. While the later phase (c) is definitely from the time of Tuthmosis III until Amenophis II (c. 1479–1400 BC) based on the pottery material collected within this stratum,⁸ at present it is not absolutely clear when the earlier phase was constructed. This could not have been immediately

⁷ Seeber 2000.

⁸ Hein 1994a, 42; 1994b, 244–7, 258, 259, 261; 1998; 2001a; 2001c, 242–3; Fuscaldo 1998; 1999; 2001.

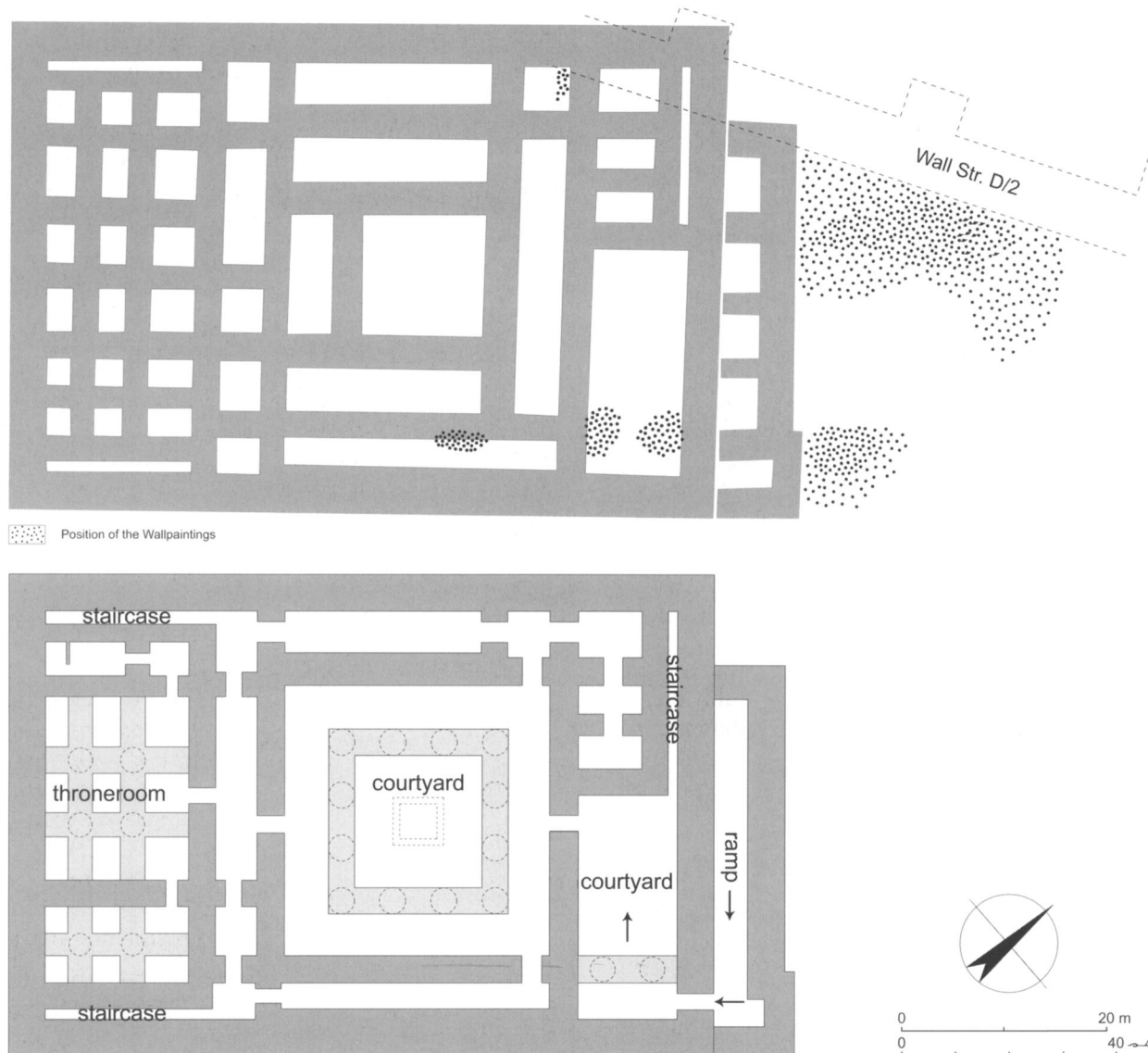


Fig. 3.5. Palace F with the dumps distributions (illustration N. Math).

after the conquest of Avaris by Ahmose, because it covers another palatial district and storage facilities, as well as a horizon of graves from the beginning of the 18th dynasty (str. e/1.1–2). Dates for the early phase of our palace district (Str.d) would therefore range from Tuthmosis I till the early part of the reign of Tuthmosis III (c. 1500–1450 BC).

Most of the wall paintings can be associated with palace F. Besides a floor painting with a maze pattern⁹ and ornamental friezes¹⁰ from the walls, the following figural motifs can be reconstructed: bull-leaping, bull-wrestling and other acrobatic performances¹¹ (PLATE 13), hunting scenes with hunters and dogs,¹² lions chasing ungulates,¹³ and other scenes with leopards doing the same. Most of those scenes were in a landscape setting (PLATE 15.1). Other motifs include a robed man and a running man against a stone façade, full-size

representations of a bearded man, perhaps women, and ornamental friezes with running spirals and other patterns, typical of Minoan art.¹⁴ As at Knossos this palace was also furnished, perhaps at its northern

⁹ Bietak in Bietak, Dorner, Hein and Janosi 1994, pl. 14B.

¹⁰ Reconstructed by Katharina Aslandidou, see: Aslandidou 2002.

¹¹ Bietak, in Bietak, Dorner, Hein and János 1994, 44–58; Bietak 2000c, 187–94; Bietak and Marinatos 1995; Bietak, Marinatos and Palyvou 2000; Bietak, Marinatos and Palyvou forthcoming; Marinatos 1998; Morgan 1995a.

¹² Bietak and Marinatos 1995.

¹³ Marinatos 1998.

¹⁴ Bietak, in Bietak, Hein *et al.* 1994, cat. nos. 219, 227; Bietak, in Bietak, Dorner, Hein and János 1994, 49, F6, pl. 17A; Aslandidou 2002.

entrance, with plaster reliefs with bulls and there is also evidence of a full-size figure with boots.¹⁵

Of specific importance is an enigmatic representation of a griffin in full scale as in the Throne Room at Knossos (PLATE 14.1–2).¹⁶ We could probably envisage such a room in this palace too. The iconography of the preserved wing pattern is so similar to the griffin behind the goddess in Xesté 3 at Akrotiri (PLATE 14.3) that one could make a case of chronological proximity. The same is true for the blue rendering of the shaved scalps signifying youth,¹⁷ a feature also observed among the paintings of Avaris.¹⁸

As griffins are shown frequently in glyptic and other art as companions of a goddess, Helga Reusch, Nanno Marinatos and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier claimed that the Knossos Throne Room was for a queen acting as ‘mistress of the animals’ rather than for a king.¹⁹ Such an interpretation would also make a case for a female throne room in palace F. It is interesting in this respect that we do not have a single Egyptian royal emblem among the paintings, but we have emblems which are connected to the palace of Knossos. One of the main friezes with bull acrobatics shows at the base a half-rossette frieze — at that time an emblem of the palace, probably only for the palace of Knossos. The same frieze shows as a background a maze pattern, which should be considered as a symbol of the palace of Knossos, perhaps indicating the ground of the palace.²⁰

The combination of the enigmatic griffin, the half-rossette frieze and the maze pattern are strong indicators of an association with Minoan kingship/queenship. The evidence of a connection between an Egyptian palace and the palace of Knossos cannot be overlooked. The above-mentioned Minoan symbols must have had a meaning for the resident of the palace. The hypothesis of a marriage between an Egyptian king and a Minoan princess²¹ would also make sense in connection with the architectural elements of the palace district. In this case palace F would offer itself as residence of a Minoan consort and palace J as a residence of another queen or a prince.

Although much would speak in favour of such an evaluation, one would expect that the big palace G would have an Egyptian wall painting programme. Painted on mud plaster, such paintings would have remained on the walls better than the hard lime plaster with the Minoan paintings. The paintings would not have fallen from the walls quickly as did the Minoan paintings on hard plaster. Therefore no such dumps can be expected. As only the substructure of the palace is preserved the paintings were most probably removed together with the brickwork in building activities during the Amarna and post-Amarna periods. Some lumps of painted wall-coating of mud with Egyptian writing and decorative motifs have been found within the debris of the substructure. They may, however, also be remains from the removed upper storeys. But they might also be remains of older palatial structures from

the Hyksos period (str. e/2), from where such fragments have been retrieved during the excavations.²²

What complicates the interpretation that palace G would be for the king and palace F for a foreign consort, is the fact that Minoan paintings have also been found north of palace G around a door with portico through the enclosure wall of the palace district. Some plaster with blue colour was even found *in situ*, but most of the fragments seemed to have fallen off the walls. The motifs were mainly decorative with loop and ivy patterns.²³ Amongst the unexpected discoveries are the lower part of a flounced skirt and a white foot with double anklets of a lady in full scale.²⁴ Other fragments show the pattern of an ashlar stone façade rendered in painting. Even wooden elements as beams in red colour were included. Precisely the same kinds of fragments were also very frequent among the dumps of palace F. We therefore concluded that either the north façade with the ramp or internal walls were given the image of an Aegean ashlar façade. It is difficult to say if the same imaginary façade was also used for the big palace, or only for the doorway of the enclosure wall H near the approach to the ramp leading to palace G.

What we do not know is if some of the wall paintings around the doorway enclosure H originated from palace G and, after having fallen from the walls, were carried downwards over the ramps and deposited at the doorway. This is possible since two fragments of painted stucco relief with a white human body and a fragment that appears to be of a yellow painted horn were found on top of the debris of palace G in area H/II. Compared to the fresco dumps of palace F the number of wall paintings which can be associated with palace G is far fewer. Nevertheless one has to try to find an explanation for this evidence.

As palace F is lacking the private part of an Egyptian palace or house, perhaps one could claim that the missing rooms were accommodated in the main palace G, which had a big private quarter. This would perhaps explain the presence of Minoan paintings in palace G also and its approach.

15 Bietak and Marinatos 1995, 54, fig. 5.

16 Bietak and Palyvou 2002.

17 Davis 1986.

18 Bietak, in Bietak, Dorner, Hein and Jánosi 1994, 48, F4, 55.

19 Reusch 1958; Niemeier 1986, 63–6; Marinatos 1993a, 151–5, figs. 122, 128–31, 134; Marinatos 1995.

20 PM I 357–9.

21 Bietak, in Bietak, Dorner, Hein and Jánosi 1994, 56; Bietak 2000c, 203–5.

22 Bietak, Dorner and Janosi 2001, 40.

23 Bietak and Marinatos 1995, 58, fig. 13; Bietak, in Bietak, Dorner and Jánosi 2001.

24 Bietak 2000c, 199, pl. B.a.

To sum up: the presence of Minoan wall paintings in the context of an Egyptian palace district with several palatial buildings is explained here as the outcome of direct contacts between the Egyptian pharaonic court of the early Tuthmoside period and the court of Knossos, the leading maritime power of that time. This would explain the Minoan palatial emblems such as the half-rossette frieze, the maze pattern, the emblematic griffin and last but not least the representation of bull-leaping and bull-grappling scenes as in the palace of Knossos. Such contacts on a high level might well have produced a political marriage between both courts — one of the usual pharaonic means of making foreign policy and of sealing agreements with foreign powers. This is well documented from Tuthmosis III onwards and specifically in the Amarna and the Boğazköy correspondence. Such an event may have been directly connected with or may have shortly preceded the representations of Keftiu delegations in the tombs of high Egyptian officials from the reign of Hatshepsut/Tuthmosis III till Amenophis II and may have caused for some time an intensification of trade and cooperation between the two powers which ended with the downfall of the thalassocracy.

Another interesting matter is the appearance of large quantities of pumice from the Minoan eruption of Thera in the later phase of the palaces (Str. c), i.e. from

Tuthmosis III onwards. Before that, pumice was found in Tell el Dab'a very rarely and its origin was not from Thera, but from other volcanoes on Kos and Nisyros. In three workshops belonging to this stratum and in the storerooms of palace G many lumps of pumice were found.²⁵ They were used as abrasive material there. Its sudden appearance can best be explained by marine transport, especially since the big lumps would only have stayed intact had they fallen into water, otherwise they would have burst into small fragments.²⁶ The evidence at Tell el Dab'a is paralleled at other sites as at Tell el-'Ajjûl (new Swedish-Palestinian excavations under Peter Fischer),²⁷ where like at Tell el Dab'a, the appearance of Thera pumice is tied to a phase of the appearance of Base-Ring I Ware.

25 Pelz, Schmid and Bichler 2000; Pelz and Bichler 2001.

26 As explained to me by Prof. Max Bichler, University of Vienna.

27 Fischer and Sadeq 2000; Fischer and Sadeq 2002.