

The Impact of Minoan Art on Egypt and the Levant: A Glimpse of Palatial Art from the Naval Base of Peru-nefer at Avaris

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Over the last two decades a sizeable palatial precinct of 13 acres, dating to the reigns of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III and Amenhotep II, was excavated at ‘Ezbet Helmy, near Tell el-Dab’a (figs. 1, 2).¹ By its size, its position at a big harbor basin (450 × 400 m), and its date, this precinct is explicable only as the royal residence at the famous pharaonic naval base Peru-nefer (“happy going forth,” that is, “happy sortie”).² The dispute over whether this famous base and its dockyards were likely to have been located near Memphis or in the eastern Nile Delta at Avaris must be decided in favor of the latter. Seagoing ships would not have

been able to reach the harbor of Memphis during the dry season—March until the end of June—as seawater would have penetrated the near empty Nile channels only up to 40 kilometers from the coast during this time.³

Within an enclosure wall we find three palaces of different sizes on high mudbrick platforms, accessible by ramps (figs. 3, 4). Only the substructures were preserved, but a reasonable reconstruction of the plans was possible.⁴

The plans of the large Palace G (160.5 × 79 m [305 × 150 cubits]) and of the small Palace J (ca. 57.5 × 21 m [110 × 40 cubits]) were similar (fig. 3). They both consisted of three main parts: a square, open courtyard, lined with colonnades; a public part, with a portico, a broad vestibule, and a nearly square reception/throne room; and finally the private apartments to the rear.

In Palace G the throne room shared space with rooms that seem to comprise a typical Thutmosid temple. The presence of a temple within an Egyptian palace is very unusual and is perhaps a feature introduced from the Near East, where palaces often integrated a temple. In the case of Palace G the god seems to have had a symbolic abode adjacent to the throne room, thus living side by side with the king. The east side of Palace G housed a narrow wing with storerooms, stairways, and offices. Each palace had a side entrance leading directly to the private apartments. Palace G with its grand scale and number of colonnades appears to have been the more important. Its portico had three rows of columns, its vestibule two, and its throne room four, while small Palace J’s portico had only one row of columns, the vestibule one, and the throne room two.

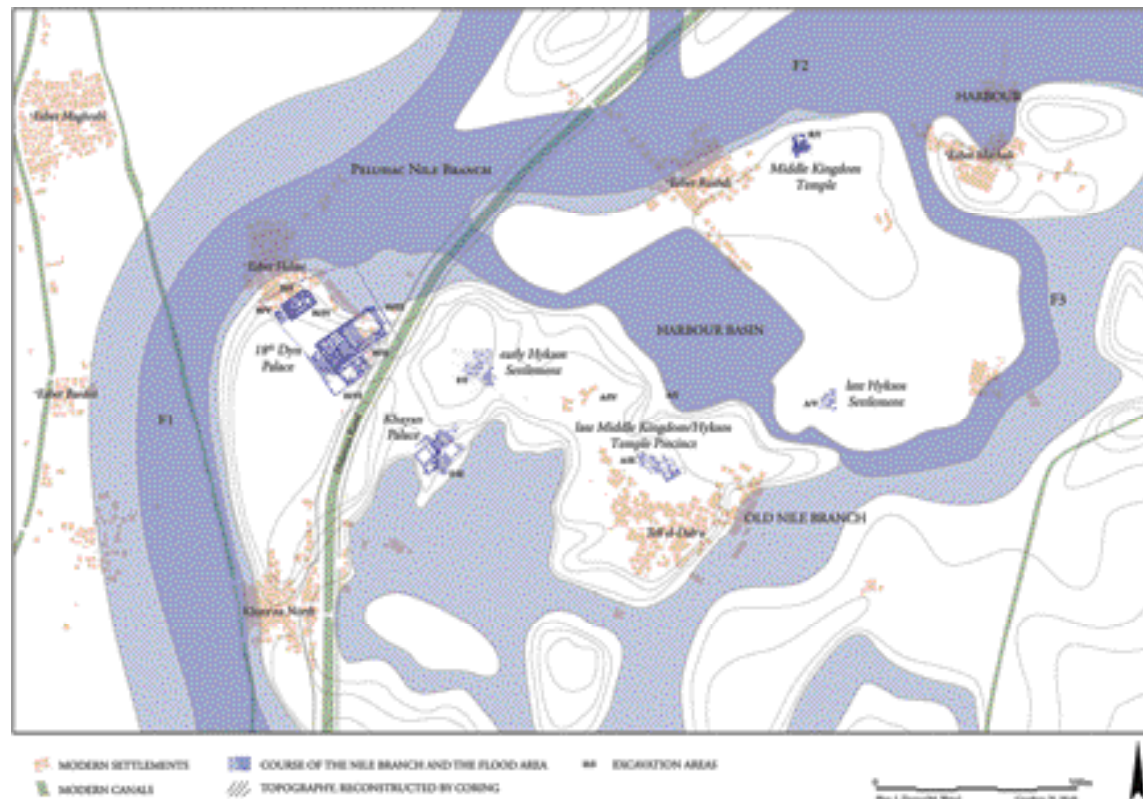


Fig. 1. Map of the harbor basin of Avaris and Peru-nefer showing the site of the Palace precinct

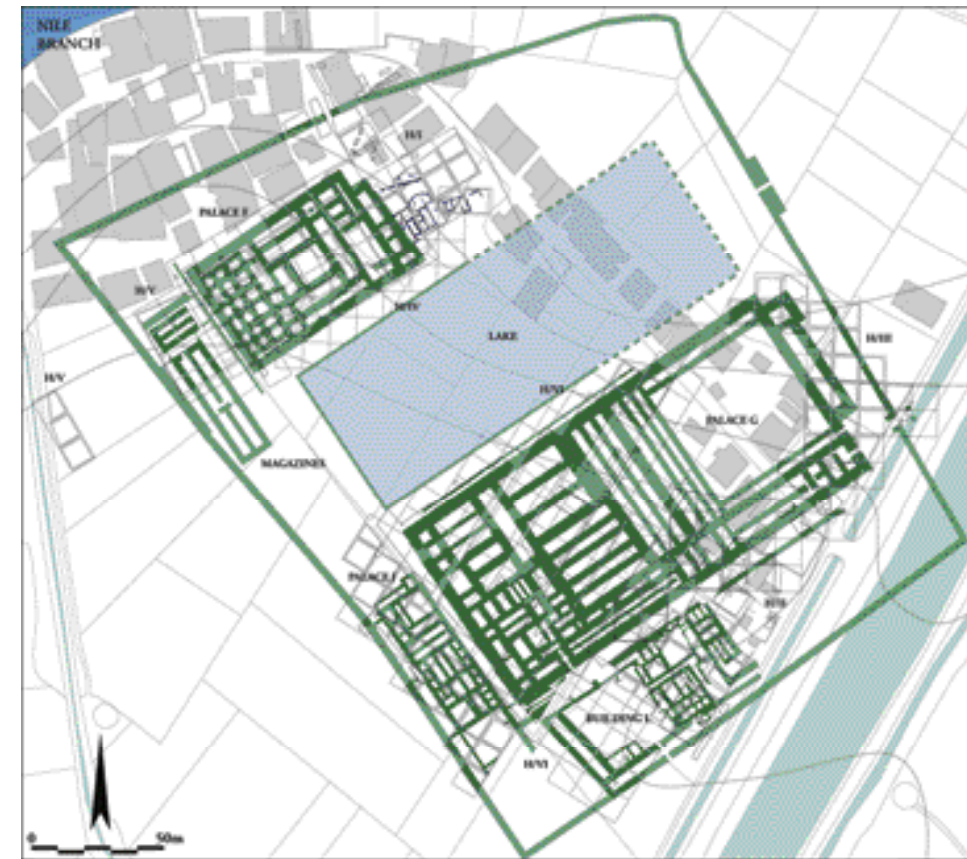
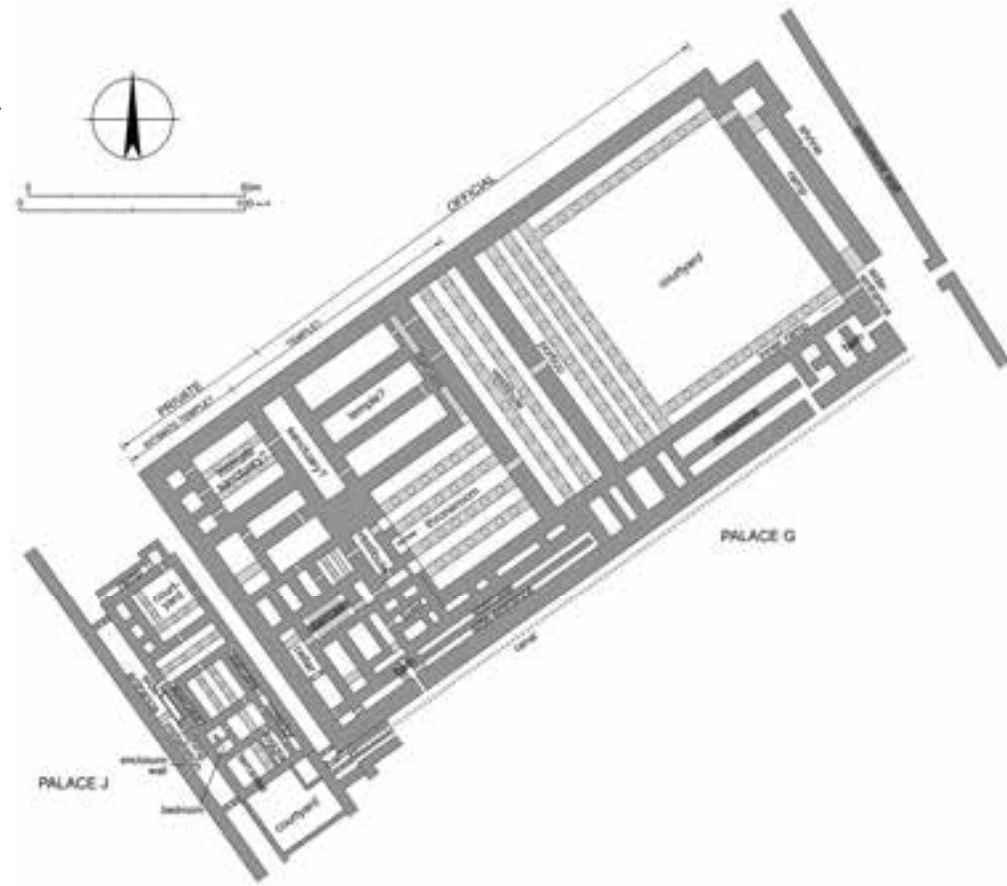


Fig. 2. Plan of the Palace precinct at ‘Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab’a

Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the plans of large Palace G and small Palace J. ‘Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab’a



The midsize Palace F deviated from this scheme (fig. 4). The square courtyard was located not at the entry to the building but at its center. The plan shows what appears to be a winding entrance system, which includes another rectangular courtyard, one without colonnades. The most important part of the building is the southern area, which can be reconstructed from a lattice of walls. Using the contemporary theory of space planning and design of houses and palaces, one can make a reasonably good re-creation of a rectangular throne room with four columns, a two-aisled side room with a single row of two columns, and a sleeping room and/or bathroom on the west side. In front of this complex there is a vestibule. We are missing the private apartments in the rear of the palace. They may have been located upstairs, as there are stairs on both sides of

the ceremonial rooms, but this would—as far as we know—not be in keeping with the Egyptian architectural tradition. We have therefore concluded that this palace was a ceremonial, not residential, one.

It was a great surprise that two of the palaces were furnished with original Minoan mural art. The paintings were found not on the walls but in thousands of fragments at the foot and around the landing of the ramps that led to the palace. The paintings must have flaked off the walls quickly, as the hard lime plaster and the shrinking mudbrick walls on alluvial ground did not technically sit well together—a sign of lack of experience on the part of the artists, who were not familiar with this kind of architecture. The splintered fragments were carried down the ramps and dumped there.

Both the technique of painting in fresco on highly compressed and polished lime plaster mixed with crushed murex shells, and the planning of the scenes and patterns with cord impressions are purely Aegean, as are the style and the motifs. Among the fragments from the medium-size Palace F were found an emblematic griffin on the same full scale as the heraldic griffins in the throne room at Knossos (fig. 5). It had spiral-lined wings and seems to have been accompanied by a lion and a leopard, not yet accommodated in the reconstruction. By analogy with the Knossos paintings, we have to assume that there was, antithetically, a pair of griffins and possibly lions and leopards flanking both sides of the throne. According to Helga Reusch, Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, and Nannó Marinatos, this would be a fitting setting for the patroness of the palace to act as an epiphany of the great goddess, the Mistress of the Animals.⁵ Indeed, there was a painted fragment of the ceremonial flounced skirt of a full-scale female among the dumps from this palace (fig. 11, top). Paintings of large bulls in

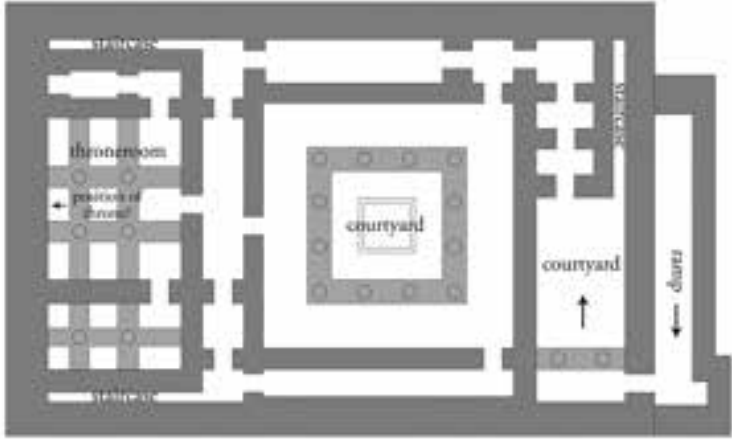


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the plan of Palace F. ‘Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab’a

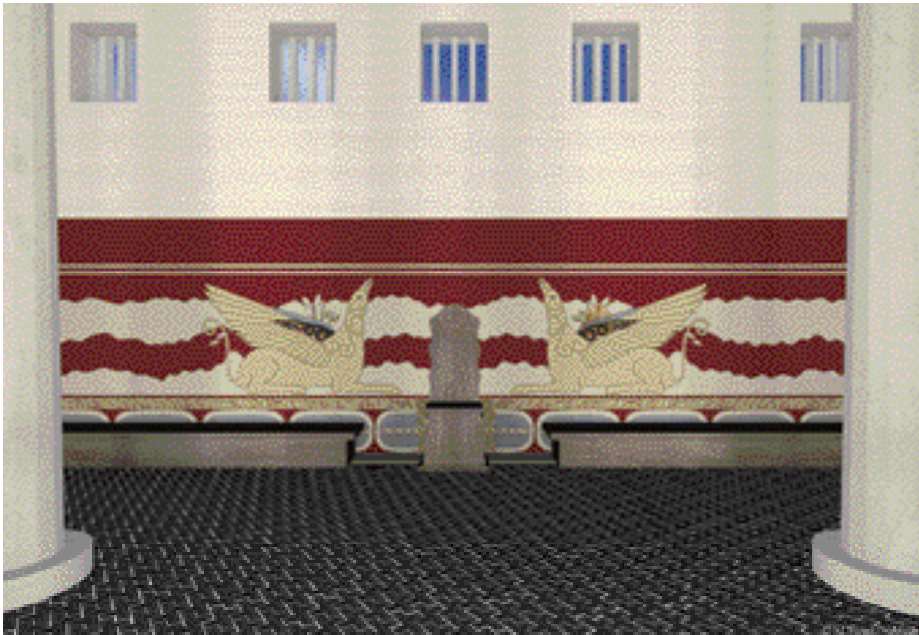


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the paintings of the emblematic griffins on the back wall of the throne room of Palace F

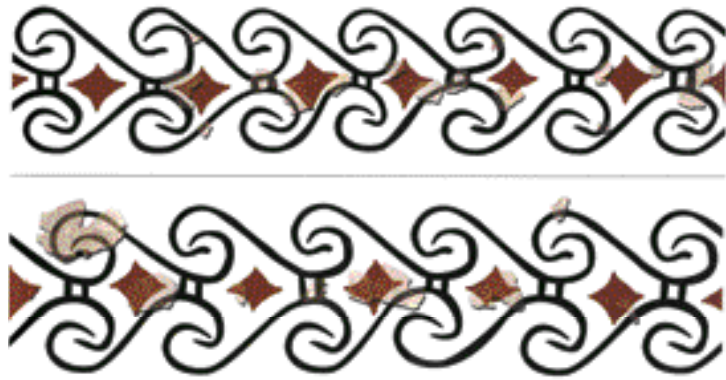


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of decorative friezes from Palace F

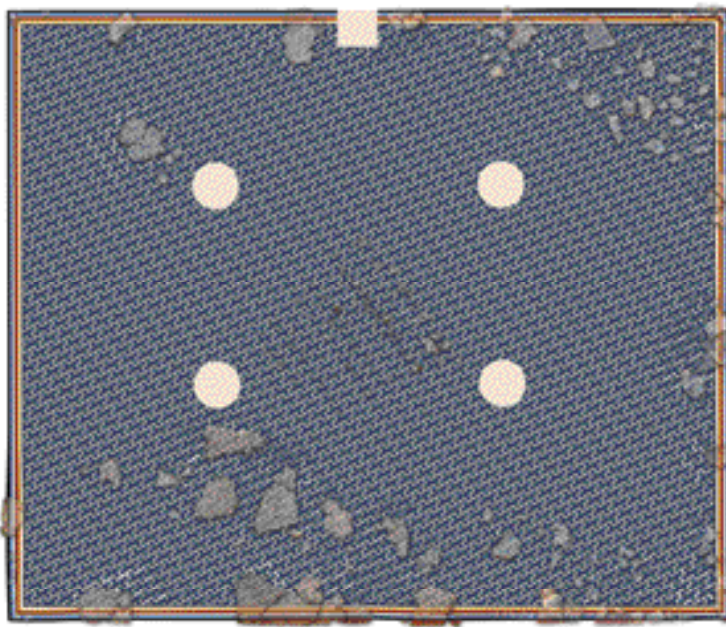


Fig. 7. Reconstructed floor painting from Palace F

all probability also once embellished the walls of this room. Friezes with running spirals and other patterns could have been positioned there, too, framing the figural representations (fig. 6).⁶ Fragments of floor paintings with a maze pattern are likely to have belonged to the throne room as well (fig. 7).⁷

One may question whether the throne was positioned in the middle of the back wall, in



Fig. 8. Reconstruction of bull-leaping frieze. ‘Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab’a, Palace F, throne room.
© Manfred Bietak, Nannó Marinatos, and Clairy Palyvou

keeping with Egyptian architecture and with the apparent position of the throne in the Royal Villa at Knossos (which is approximately contemporary with our palace if not earlier).⁸ Alternatively, the throne could have been placed against the middle of the right wall, as in the later Aegean throne rooms at Knossos and Pylos. We believe that the former solution is more likely, because the right wall is shorter and must surely have had a door to the small room on the right side of the throne room. The back wall is also closer to the columns—which would have made the throne more easily visible to visitors. For these reasons we would like to reconstruct the heraldic griffins on the back wall.

Besides full-scale representations, there were smaller friezes (fig. 8), which were still larger than their miniature counterparts at Knossos. Most conspicuous is the bull-leaping frieze against the backdrop of a maze pattern, which represents a palatial precinct, most likely symbolizing the original palace pavement. It ends in an undulating silhouette against a red field above. Two blue-speckled and two reddish-yellow-speckled bulls are shown in two registers, the lower ones along the baseline against the maze as a background, the upper ones along the undulating silhouette against the red background. The animals are engaged by bull-leapers and

bull-grapplers. Three bulls move toward the left side and one bull turns to the right. There could, of course, have been more than four bulls, but we can offer only a minimal reconstruction.

The leapers are painted in an ochre hue, which is unusual, as leapers are normally rendered in reddish-brown. Along with the partly shaved head of the leapers, this could be a signifier of youth.⁹ They wear the Minoan kilt, which opens at the sides and reveals the hem, although the typically Minoan penis sheath is not depicted. This panel is bordered along its base by a frieze of split rosettes, seemingly a court emblem from Knossos, where such half rosettes have been found cut in stone as an architectural motif, possibly framing a “window of appearances.”¹⁰

The frieze extended to the left beyond a striped column and palm tree in the red upper field. In contrast to the palatial maze panel, the scenery indicates a wilderness. The base consists of a rocky lower area and a light brown/yellowish middle ground, ending in its upper part, in an undulating silhouette, again crowned by an upper section in red. The fragments allow a reconstruction of four bulls, two black-speckled and two reddish-yellow-speckled ones, again in two registers, moving right, in the opposite direction than that of the bulls of the maze frieze. A fifth bull seems to be galloping toward the left, in the other direction.

It is interesting that both friezes have a single bull facing in the opposite direction from the others. This is reminiscent of a hunting frieze on a Mycenaean ivory box from a Late Cypriot IIIB tomb at Enkomi, Cyprus, where three bulls, a fallow deer, and an *agrimi* run to the left, fleeing a hunter on a chariot; only one bull has turned to attack him (see p. 224, fig. 22).¹¹ The motif of a single assaulted animal turning to face its attacker while the rest of the pack or herd flees can also be found in other animal scenes, such as that on the Mycenaean lion-hunt dagger.¹²

The bulls on the left frieze (fig. 8, left side) were also engaged by leapers and wrestlers; some of these seem to leap along the length of the bull, while others do a side vault across the back of the beast. The first bull on the right has been wrestled to the ground by two acrobats and is on his knees, his head held upward, the muzzle open with the tongue hanging out, signaling defeat.

Both friezes together measure about 4.2 m in length, but there seems to have been another frieze on the right side, cut off by a striped column and perhaps also by a palm tree in the register of the red area. This is where acrobats walking on their hands or somersaulting were depicted within a palm grove. The three panels, each ca. 2.1 m in length, could together have covered the back wall of the room to the left of the throne room, which is more



Fig. 9. Preliminary reconstruction of lion friezes. 'Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab'a, Palace F. © Nannó Marinatos and Marian Negrete Martínez

than 6 m wide. Yet why reconstruct this tripartite frieze with the bull leaping and acrobatic event on the back wall and why in a room other than the throne room?

As the extant representations in the throne room are full size, Lyvia Morgan considers that the rest of the throne room's walls were likely also covered with full-scale figures.¹³ By implication, the smaller size of the bull-leaping frieze suggests that it decorated another room.

As bull-leaping scenes were depicted at that time in mural art only in the palace of Knossos, we may infer that the theme held special importance for Minoan Knossos. Bull games are generally believed to have been part of the initiation rituals for elite youths performed during a festival for the great

Minoan goddess.¹⁴ This event was linked to palatial Knossos and found its narrative in wall art. To find in Egypt such exclusive scenes, absent even from other Minoan palaces, is unique, and proof of a relationship between the two courts. If the back wall of the throne room was given over to the most important icons of kingship in Crete and the Near East—the Minoan type of griffins, with accompanying lions and leopards—this palace wall was of key importance and one may assume that its meaning would have carried over into the adjoining room, expressed in the representation of the bull games, which were of utmost importance for the center of Minoan civilization.

Other friezes—including at least ten lions hunting bulls (fig. 9),¹⁵ at least six leopards

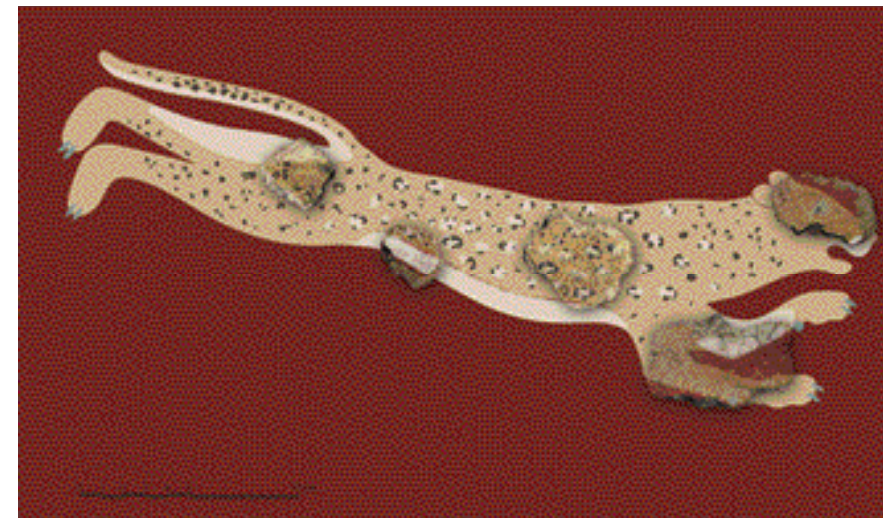


Fig. 10. Preliminary reconstruction of leopards. 'Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab'a, Palace F. © Lyvia Morgan and Marian Negrete Martínez

stalking and chasing fallow deer (fig. 10) and other animals,¹⁶ and male hunters with dogs chasing ungulates¹⁷—fit well into an ideology of a hierarchy in nature and could have been placed on the two long walls of this side room.¹⁸ The action is set in a mountain landscape with vegetation, which could be considered typically Cretan.¹⁹

The other imagery from this palace, on the same scale as the bull and hunting friezes,

consists of a robed priest and a running athlete,²⁰ both against the facade of a house. They could have been located in the side room or in the vestibule outside the throne room. Full-scale human representations probably originated in the vestibule in front of the throne room or the porticoed entrance to the palace.²¹

The plaster reliefs of bulls are too few to have covered the back walls of the colonnades

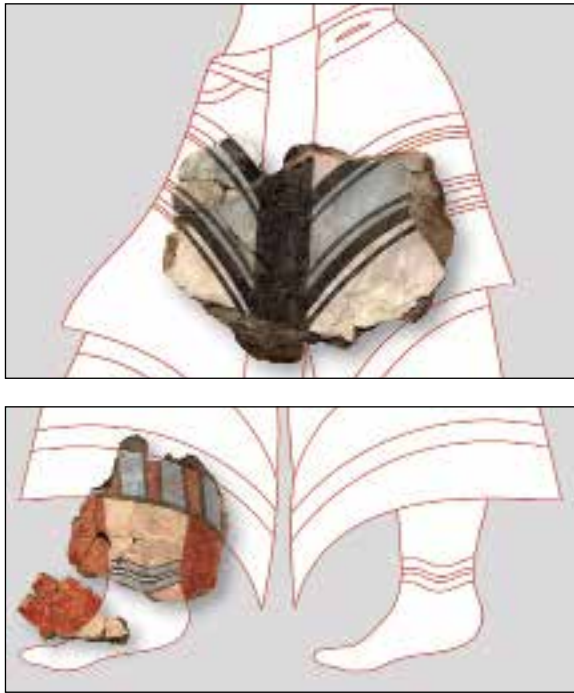


Fig. 11. Painted plaster fragments of figures wearing flounced skirts. 'Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab'a, dumps of Palaces F and G



Fig. 12. Plaster relief fragments of young god figure. 'Ezbet Helmy/Tell el-Dab'a, Palace G

around the central court.²² By analogy with the palace of Knossos, bulls in relief should have been positioned near the entrance. The most effective place would have been the back wall of the portico behind the entrance, to signal to the visitor the symbolism of the palace and, at the same time, to act as an apotropaic image. The painted imitation of an ashlar facade could have come from the walls of the courtyards;²³ the fragments with this pattern are not numerous enough to have covered the outside of the palace.

There is much less material with wall paintings from the large Palace G. Most of the rubbish heaps behind the door in the precinct's northeast wall were destroyed by the excavation of a drain channel in modern times. Besides fragments of a landscape, there is the imposing lower part of a full-scale female figure with flounced skirt and feet with anklets of blue, probably denoting silver (fig. 11, bottom).²⁴ Is she the representation of a goddess, a priestess, or a queen?

Of special importance are the plaster reliefs, dumped then carried to and fro by modern plowing. Among them is a representation of a young god with extended hand holding a stick (fig. 12), an arm or foot of a full-scale figure against a red background, and the head of a lion.²⁵ It is impossible to say from where these images came.

The Minoan paintings have been explained in different ways. It is interesting to note that, among the motifs of animals, there is a preference for beasts from Africa, such as lions and leopards. These animals are also well represented in glyptic and other minor arts in the Aegean. It seems strange that as of yet we have no representations of ships at this important harbor town; we should, however, bear in mind that only some five to ten percent of the wall paintings have been uncovered. According to Morgan, the absence of ships may be also a local or a chronological phenomenon. Ships are depicted in the context of festive water processions in the miniature paintings of Thera and Kea, dated to Late Minoan (LM) IA,²⁶ whereas the paintings in

the palaces of Peru-nefer date later, to LM IB. The presence at Peru-nefer of the Knossian court emblems and bull-leaping motifs are strong evidence of a direct relationship between the courts of Knossos and Egypt, and Aegean arrow tips in fair quantities have been found at one of the palace workshops.²⁷ Minoan ships in the dockyards of the harbor

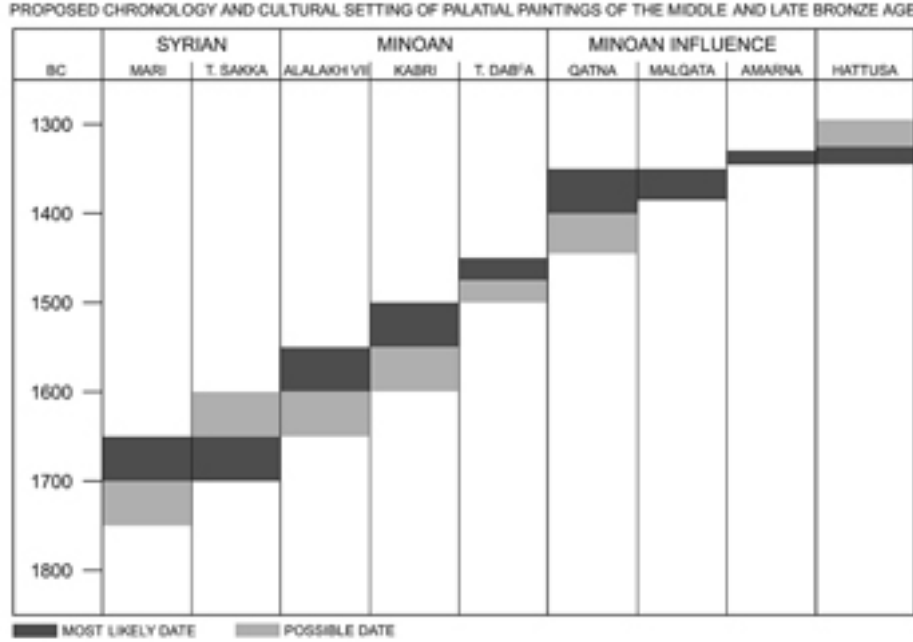
stronghold of Peru-nefer are attested in a papyrus in the British Museum.²⁸ This makes direct maritime links a certainty.

The date of the frescoes at Tell el-Dab'a/'Ezbet Helmy coincides with the first appearance of representations of Minoans and Minoan ornamental motifs in Egyptian tomb paintings in the Theban necropolis,



Fig. 13. Wall paintings. Thebes, Tomb of Senenmut. Dynasty 18, reign of Hatshepsut, ca. 1473–1458 B.C. (Top two rows) Ceiling patterns based on Minoan fabrics; (bottom row) Minoan emissaries bearing gifts from Crete to the Egyptian court

Fig. 14.



during the joint reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (fig. 13).²⁹ It is very clear that a special event had taken place, and that it appears to have been related to the port of Peru-nefer during the period when these Minoan delegations were depicted. This makes it highly probable that, early in the reign of Thutmose III, a special agreement had been struck between Egypt and the Minoan thalassocracy, which concerned seafaring and maritime power. Given the mounting threat to Egypt's interests in the Levant and the necessity of engaging in warfare in that area, Thutmose III and Hatshepsut were probably reluctant to rely on troops supplied by the princes of the coastal Levant, who had at that time been infiltrated by Egypt's adversary in the Near East, the kingdom of Mitanni. Thutmose obviously chose to turn instead to the Minoans to build up his fleet. This deal may have been sealed by the customary diplomatic marriage. The representation of females in ceremonial flounced skirts and the painted royal emblems of Knossos on the bull-leaping frieze could be indications that such a political union had been achieved (figs. 8, 11).

The impact of Minoan decorative and figural art can be felt up to the Amarna age, and in decorative art even up to the Rameside age. The depiction of the flying gallop and natural trot of quadrupeds as well as the map-like rendering of landscapes had been adopted from Minoan art for some time, along with decorative patterns.³⁰ Minoan paintings and their influence have also been found at other sites in the Levant.³¹ They appeared in Miletos, Alalakh, and Tel Kabri in palatial contexts as part of the phenomenon of the widening influence of the Minoan civilization in the sixteenth century B.C., even before their appearance at Avaris/Peru-nefer. There seem to have been more palaces with such paintings in fresco on polished lime plaster. Some fragments of highly polished monochrome plaster have been found in a Middle Bronze Age context at Ebla.³² Minoan-influenced paintings retrieved from the palace of Qatna date later than the paintings at Avaris/Peru-nefer, most probably to the first part of the fourteenth century B.C. (fig. 14).³³ (For a different opinion, see Pfälzner essay, p. 201.)

How can we explain this expansion of Minoan art into the Levant, which should be seen not as a sudden event, but as a phenomenon taking place over two centuries? Was it a kind of "Versailles effect"—the spread of a distinct palatial art style in the eastern Mediterranean?³⁴ This is possible. We shall see more clearly if more evidence turns up from other palaces in the Levant. The evidence from Avaris/Peru-nefer, however, seems to be a distinctive case. The volume of paintings, the motif of bull-leaping and other bull games, and the maze pattern and the split rosettes as emblems of the palace of Knossos all point to a special relationship between those two courts in the fifteenth century B.C., attributable to a common political interest. What had happened in Peru-nefer with the embellishment of its palaces with Minoan wall paintings had a strong and stimulating influence on Egyptian art of Dynasty 18, resulting in a marked softening of the severe canon of art and a freer style of two-dimensional art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1. Bietak, Dorner, and Jánosi 2001; Bietak 2005; Bietak 2007b.
2. Bietak 2009a; Bietak 2009b; Bietak 2010a; Bietak 2010b.
3. See note 2.
4. Bietak 2005, pp. 145–56; Bietak 2007b, pp. 21–26, figs. 16, 22.
5. Reusch 1958; W.-D. Niemeier 1986; N. Marinatos 1995.
6. Aslanidou 2002.
7. Bietak 2007b, p. 43.
8. For the position of thrones in Egypt, see Bietak 2005; Lacovara 2009; for Knossos, see Evans 1921–35, vol. 2 (1928), pp. 396–413, figs. 225, 232.
9. L. Morgan 1995, p. 42; Bietak 2007c, pp. 77–78.
10. Hägg 1987.
11. Buchholz and Karageorghis 1973, p. 163, no. 1749.
12. Lyvia Morgan, personal communication.
13. Lyvia Morgan, personal communication.
14. Nannó Marinatos (2007, pp. 149–50) postulates a solar goddess, because of the combination with the split-rosette frieze, rosettes on the chest of the griffins in Knossos, and the palm trees. On the festival of the great goddesses, see Cameron 1987.
15. L. Morgan 2004; N. Marinatos 2010.
16. L. Morgan 2010b.
17. N. Marinatos and L. Morgan 2005; L. Morgan 2006; L. Morgan 2010a.
18. For the ideology of a hierarchy in nature, see N. Marinatos 1993, pp. 196–200.
19. This material is being studied by Lyvia Morgan.
20. Bietak and N. Marinatos 1995, pp. 56–57, figs. 9, 11.
21. Aslanidou 2005.
22. Von Rüden in preparation.
23. Clairly Palyvou, of the Technion Thessaloniki, is studying these architectural representations.
24. Bietak 2007b, p. 42, fig. 39.
25. Von Rüden in preparation.
26. Reconstructed representations of ships at Tel Kabri date to the same period. See W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998.
27. Bietak, Dorner, and Jánosi 2001, p. 87, fig. 43.
28. British Museum, London, EA 10056.
29. Vercoutter 1954; Vercoutter 1956; Wachsmann 1987; Matthaeus 1995; Rehak 1998; Duhoux 2003.
30. Bietak 2000a, nn. 21, 22; L. Morgan 2006, pp. 251–53.
31. Among a series of similar articles, see W.-D. Niemeier and B. Niemeier 1998. For a new chronological assessment of the paintings, see Bietak 2007a.
32. I thank Paolo Matthiae for showing me the fragments during a 2003 visit to Ebla.
33. For the paintings from Qatna, see von Rüden 2011, pp. 60–63; for those from Avaris/Peru-nefer, see Bietak 2007a.
34. As suggested by Malcolm Wiener, personal communication.