

THE EGYPTIAN COMMUNITY IN AVARIS DURING THE HYKSOS PERIOD

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Abstract: Papyrus Rhind and other papyri which were kept and even written or copied in Avaris suggest strongly that the Hyksos employed Egyptian scribes and perhaps even schools of scribes. It is possible that these scribes were employed during the Hyksos Period from the former centres of Egyptian administration, but it is also possible that they were recruited from the Egyptian community in Avaris, which implies that these people were able to keep their Egyptian identity and Egyptian standards of language, culture and writing.

This article investigates to what extent the Egyptian community living in Avaris before the settlement of Western Asiatic immigrants was able to keep its identity and under which conditions they were able to survive in Avaris, especially after the takeover by the 15th Dynasty, the Hyksos. The answer to this question is a challenge for archaeology and a test for recognising ethnic markers. Without the possibility of finding papyri because of poor preservation conditions of organic matters, it was still possible to identify the survival of the Egyptian community within the limits of the old walled settlement of the Middle Kingdom at ʿEzbet Rushdi. It is a quarter where no intramural inhumations – a typical ethnic marker of Near Eastern settlements of the Middle Bronze Age – could be found. On top of this evidence, the area without inhumations was extended to the south beyond the original borders of the town during the Hyksos Period. The neighbouring living quarters have, however, intramural inhumations and at the same time provided finds of the toggle pin – a part of Canaanite dress. The toggle pin was entirely missing in the quarter thought to be inhabited by the Egyptian community.

Keywords: Avaris; Hyksos Period; 15th Dynasty; Egyptian Community; Ezbet Rushdi; intramural inhumations

The ancient settlement of Avaris owes its importance in antiquity to its position at the easternmost Nile branch and its advantages as harbour from which the sea could be reached at short distance of only about 30–40 km during the second millennium BC. That it was a most advantageous harbour town is attested by inscriptions: the Second Kamose Stela;¹ Papyrus Anastasi III, 7.5–6;² and naos doors in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.³ The regime of the river Nile, before the construction of *barrages*, limited the positioning of harbours for seagoing ships to locations only within reach of the Mediterranean Sea as the low period of the Nile (March to early July) shrank its normal capacity to one-fifth and only the sea penetrating the nearly empty river channels enabled ships to navigate the lower reaches of the Delta.⁴

It seems that the harbour function of this settlement goes back already to the 12th Dynasty, or even before, as planned settlements can be found on both sides of a sizable basin of up to c. 450 × 400 m, which was connected to the Nile by feeder- and exit channels that created a flow that slowed down sedimentation and the filling-up of this basin (Fig. 1). This basin was identified as harbour by a group of French paleo-geographers.⁵

While the early 12th Dynasty planned settlement, which may even go back to the late First Intermediate Period, is situated west of a harbour basin, the planned settlement of ʿEzbet Rushdi, which dates, at the latest, from Amenemhet II onward, is positioned to its east (Fig. 1). Both settlements were oriented according to the cardinal points. Therefore, it is very likely that the harbour basin had at that time a more natural rounded shape of a lake and not yet the NNW–SSE orientation that can be verified for the Hyksos Period according to the parallel orientation of the settlement and temples at that time. The Middle Kingdom town has been encroached upon and enlarged

¹ HABACHI 1972, 36–37.

² Translation by CAMINOS 1954, 101.

³ TURAYEV 1913, pl. 13; BIETAK 1975, 205–206.

⁴ BIETAK 2010a, 139–142; 2010b, 20–21.

⁵ TRONCHÈRE et al. 2008; 2012; TRONCHÈRE 2010; see also BIETAK 2016.

to its south and east by the settlement of a Near Eastern population, carriers of a partly Egyptian-ised Middle Bronze Age culture.⁶

Thus far, all the historical attention has focused on the Near Eastern population, which settled at Avaris from the late 12th Dynasty, throughout the

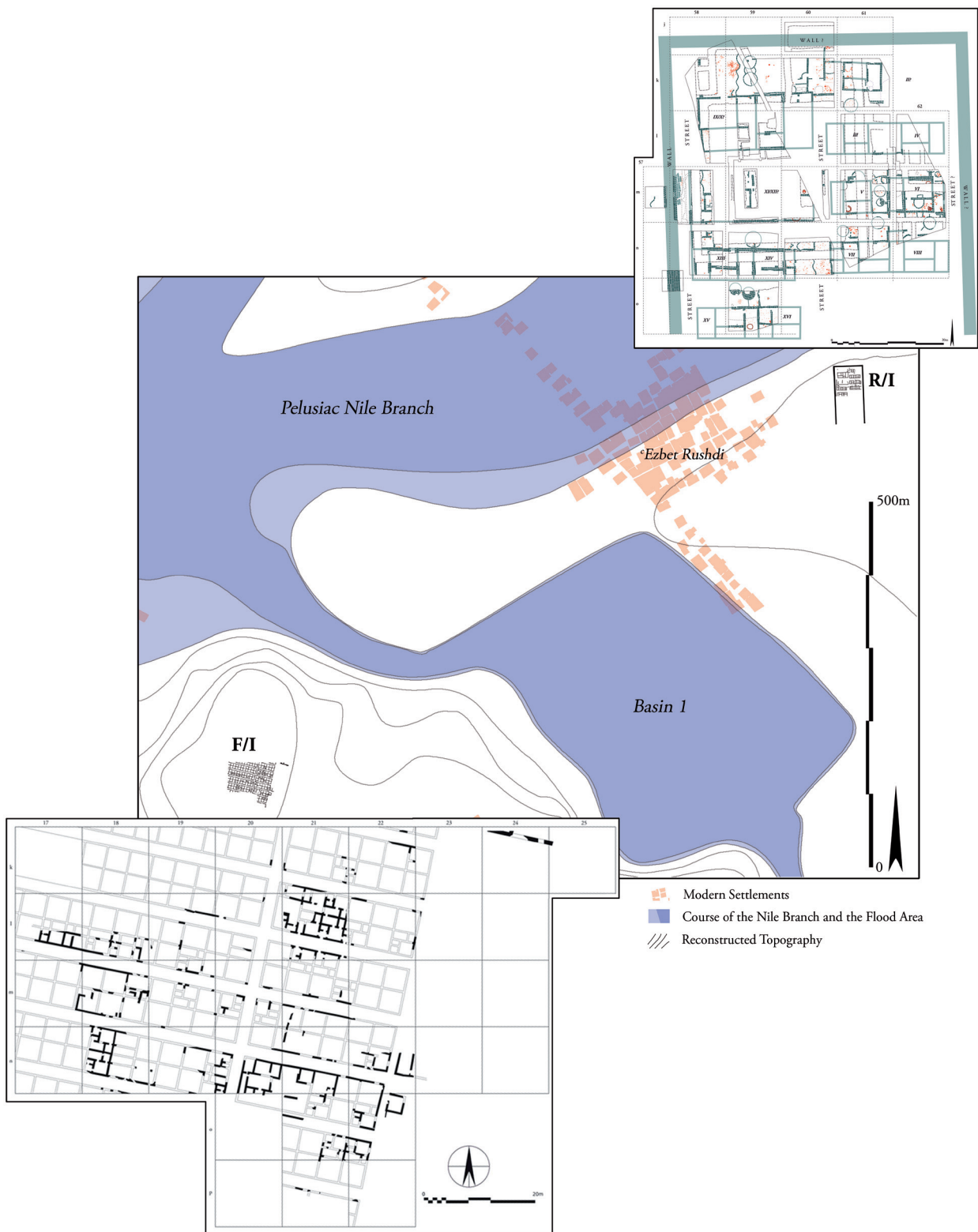


Fig. 1 The position of the MK settlements at 'Ezbet Rushdi and in Area F/I in Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris

⁶ For an introduction to the settlement history of Tell el-Dab'a, see BIETAK 1996; 2006.

Second Intermediate Period (SIP) and until the end of the Hyksos Period. This population can be considered responsible for the domination of Egypt by the foreign dynasty of the Hyksos. One should not forget, however, that this settlement was founded by the Egyptians at the beginning of the 12th Dynasty or even before⁷ and that it was a purely Egyptian town during this period as the two settlements east and west of the harbour clearly show.⁸ One wonders, however, what became of this population during the 13th Dynasty and the Hyksos Period. Were they absorbed by the Near Eastern population or did they keep their ethnic and cultural identity within this large Canaanite albeit Egyptianised community?

This question has, thus far, never been adequately addressed. We know from papyri such as especially the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus in the British Museum that this document was copied from an older papyrus, has a date of the 33rd year of the Hyksos King Apophis and was therefore kept at Avaris where it later received secondary inscriptions during the siege of this town as some entries show on the reverse.⁹ Also other papyri seem to have been copied during the Hyksos Period by Egyptian scribes. Archaeological evidence has thus far never been raised.

Physical anthropologists have recognized that the previously investigated population sample of 257 individuals from Avaris during the Second Intermediate Period, shows a marked distinction towards the Upper and Lower Egyptian skeletal series. The population has its nearest similarity cluster in the Levant and in Phoenician and Punic series.¹⁰ Most interesting is the distinct sexual dimorphism concerning robustness, which may have its origin in the selection process or the founder effect of the population.¹¹ If the latter is the case, this would mean that the majority of the female partners were taken from somewhere else in the Near East and not from the place of origin of the males. I would not exclude the possibility that the females originated from the local population. As they also show strong affinities with Near

Eastern and a distinct difference from Egyptian series one may assume that the inhabitants of this part of the Eastern Delta were always subject to ethnic influx from the east as it was until now.¹² If this assumption is correct it would mean that the majority of Canaanites who immigrated during the late 12th and 13th dynasties to Tell el-Dab^a took their female partners from the local population originating from previous immigration, but already completely Egyptianised in their cultural identity. This would have invited a melange of genes and also a social fusion of the two components of population. To our surprise, however, there is now new evidence that the Egyptians at Avaris were able, to some extent, to keep their identity and also stayed in the oldest part of the settlement as a block together.

The Egyptian planned settlement of the 12th Dynasty at ^oEzbet Rushdi was investigated by an excavation in 1996 and 1997 under my direction (Fig. 2–3).¹³ According to a stela dating to the 5th year of Senwosret III, found by Shehata Adam in the 1950s, the settlement had the name *ḥw.t R3-w3.ty Imn-m-ḥ3.t m3^c-ḥrw nt R3-w3.ty nty m mw nw n(i)w.t tn mh.ty ḥw.t R3-w3.ty Ht(t)y* “The estate ‘The Mouth of the two Ways of Amenemhat’, justified, which is in the water of this town, north of the Estate ‘The mouth of the two ways of Khety’”.¹⁴

According to this text one has to assume two walled planned settlements, one probably going back to the Heracleopolitan Khety and one to a 12th Dynasty king Amenemhat, probably to Amenemhet I. Those two walled settlements can be identified probably with the two planned settlements east and west of the harbour, but the pottery dating does not yet support this interpretation. The planned settlement of F/I, west of the harbour lake, seems to date according to Ernst Czerny from the time of late 11th till the early 12th Dynasty (Fig. 1).¹⁵ The planned settlement of ^oEzbet Rushdi seems not to be earlier than Amenemhat II,¹⁶ but each settlement has been only partly excavated. The royal sculptures from the temple at ^oEzbet Rushdi,

⁷ CZERNY 1999.

⁸ CZERNY 2016.

⁹ PEET 1923; ROBINS & SHUTE 1987.

¹⁰ WINKLER & WILFING 1991, 90–120, 139–40.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 120, 139–40.

¹² ‘AMAR 1944.

¹³ BIETAK & DORNER 1998; and now published by CZERNY 2016.

¹⁴ ADAM 1959, 216–7, Pl. IX; for an interpretation of this name, see FISCHER 1961, 107–109; KEES 1962, 2; CZERNY 1999, 13–16; BIETAK & DORNER 2008, 18–9; CZERNY 2016, 15f.

¹⁵ CZERNY 1999, 120–129.

¹⁶ CZERNY 2016, 444–448.



Fig. 2 The planned settlement of the 12th Dynasty at 'Ezbet Rushdi Phase e/3 (after CZERNY 2016, Fig. 5A)

which date to the time of Sesostriis III are without inscriptions, but originate according to Hourig Souroussian from the beginning of the 12th Dynasty.¹⁷ They seem to have been moved from an older temple, which may have been situated outside our excavation area in the south or still in the older settlement at F/I. As south of the settlement of 'Ezbet Rushdi, the site was only occupied from the Hyksos Period onward¹⁸ the specification "south" on the temple stela, found by Shehata Adam should be seen according to the river course and,

in this case, our identification of the two planned settlements could be correct. According to Czerny, it is also possible that the name of Khety is an old field-name¹⁹ while the settlement of 'Ezbet Rushdi could be either named after Amenemhat II or we have a still undiscovered core going back to the founder of the 12th Dynasty Amenemhat I.

The site at 'Ezbet Rushdi was levelled in the 20th century for agricultural land reclamation. Therefore, no strata of the Second Intermediate Period are preserved, with the exception of pits of

¹⁷ CZERNY 2016, 427–440.

¹⁸ S. below, n. 25

¹⁹ CZERNY 1999, 131–135.



Fig. 3 The planned settlement of the 12th Dynasty with the temple of ^cEzbet Rushdi, all phases together (after CZERNY 2016, Fig. 56)

the 13th Dynasty and the following Second Intermediate Period. It is remarkable that the archaeological evidence shows that in the Second Intermediate Period with two exceptions in the area of the temple (which was not a habitation area and was at the fringe of the settlement),²⁰ no tombs were cut

into the ground. Intramural burials were, however, an integral custom at Avaris, which was inhabited at that time largely by a population of Near Eastern origin, which according to the sparse onomastic evidence seems to have spoken a Western Semitic idiom²¹ and may be called for convenience

²⁰ CZERNY 2016, 173f.

²¹ HOCH 1994, 498–499; SCHNEIDER 1998, 31–49; 2003, 123–176, esp. 148f., 151, 153–155, 160. According to JOACHIM

QUACK (2010, 77), the syllabic transcription of western Semitic names in the New Kingdom developed during the Second Intermediate Period.



Fig. 4 A seal impression of the mayor of Avaris Imeny-senebnefer from the 13th Dynasty found at ^cEzbet Rushdi (after CZERNY 2001, Fig. 1–2)

sake Canaanites.²² The custom of burying the dead within the settlement is considered their ethnic marker, whereas the Ancient Egyptians kept the burial sites separate from the settlements except for infant burials in pottery containers. The fact that practically no tombs were interred within the precinct of the planned settlement of the 12th Dynasty during the Second Intermediate Period is an indication that the Egyptian population continued to settle at this site until the Hyksos Period, most probably until the end of this epoch. Otherwise tombs with the typical inventory of the hybrid partly Egyptianised Middle Bronze Age culture, found everywhere else at Tell el-Dab^a,²³ would have been found also at the site of the MK town of ^cEzbet Rushdi. Even as the settlement lay-

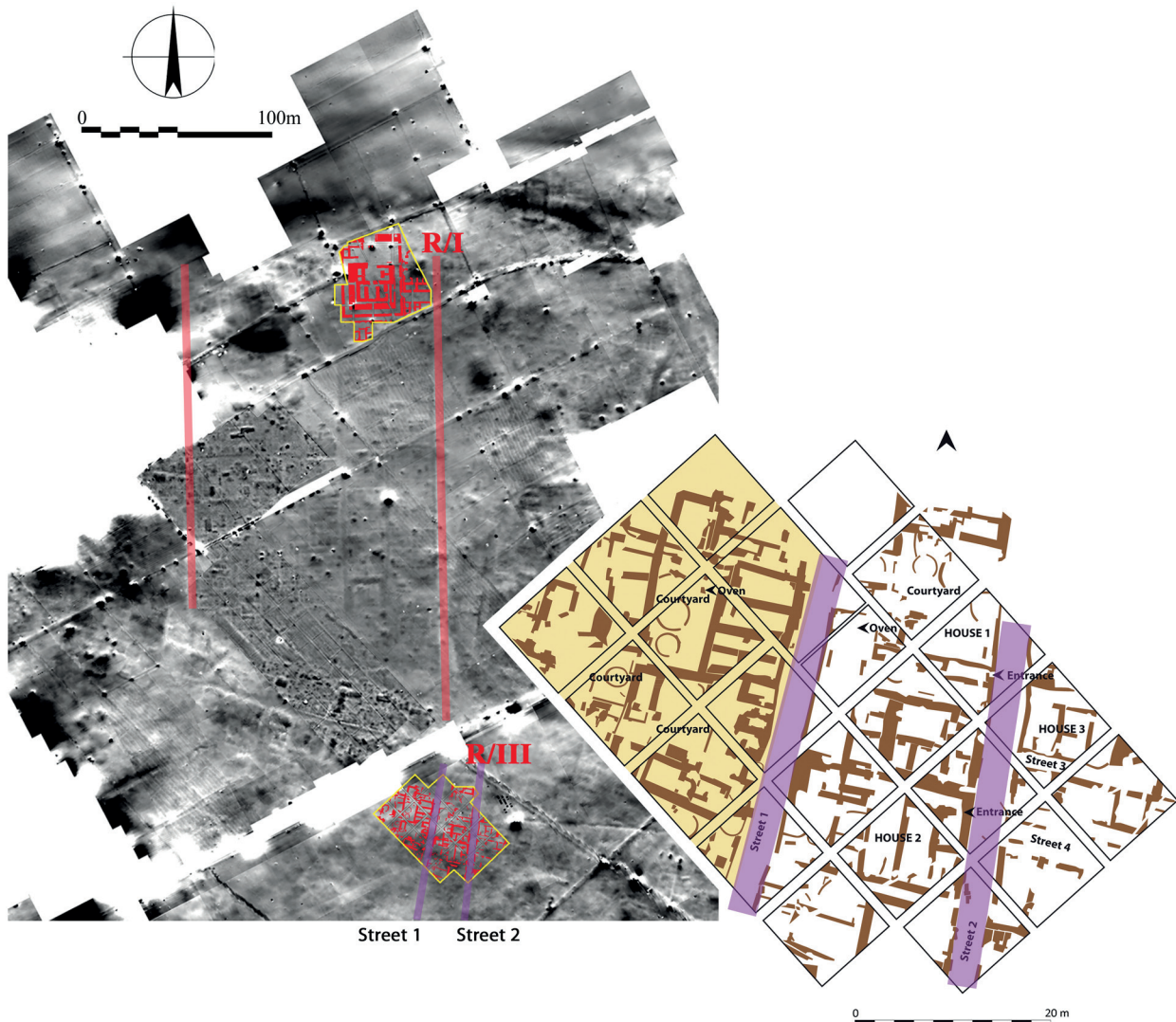


Fig. 5 Geomagnetic map of ^cEzbet Rushdi, showing the MK town walls and the streets of the settlement of the Hyksos Period south of it. The westernmost street is in direct prolongation but in slightly different orientation of the eastern MK townwall

²² HACKETT 1997, 408–414.

²³ VAN DEN BRINK 1982; BIETAK 1991; KOPETZKY 1993; FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2002; 2008; SCHIESTL 2009.

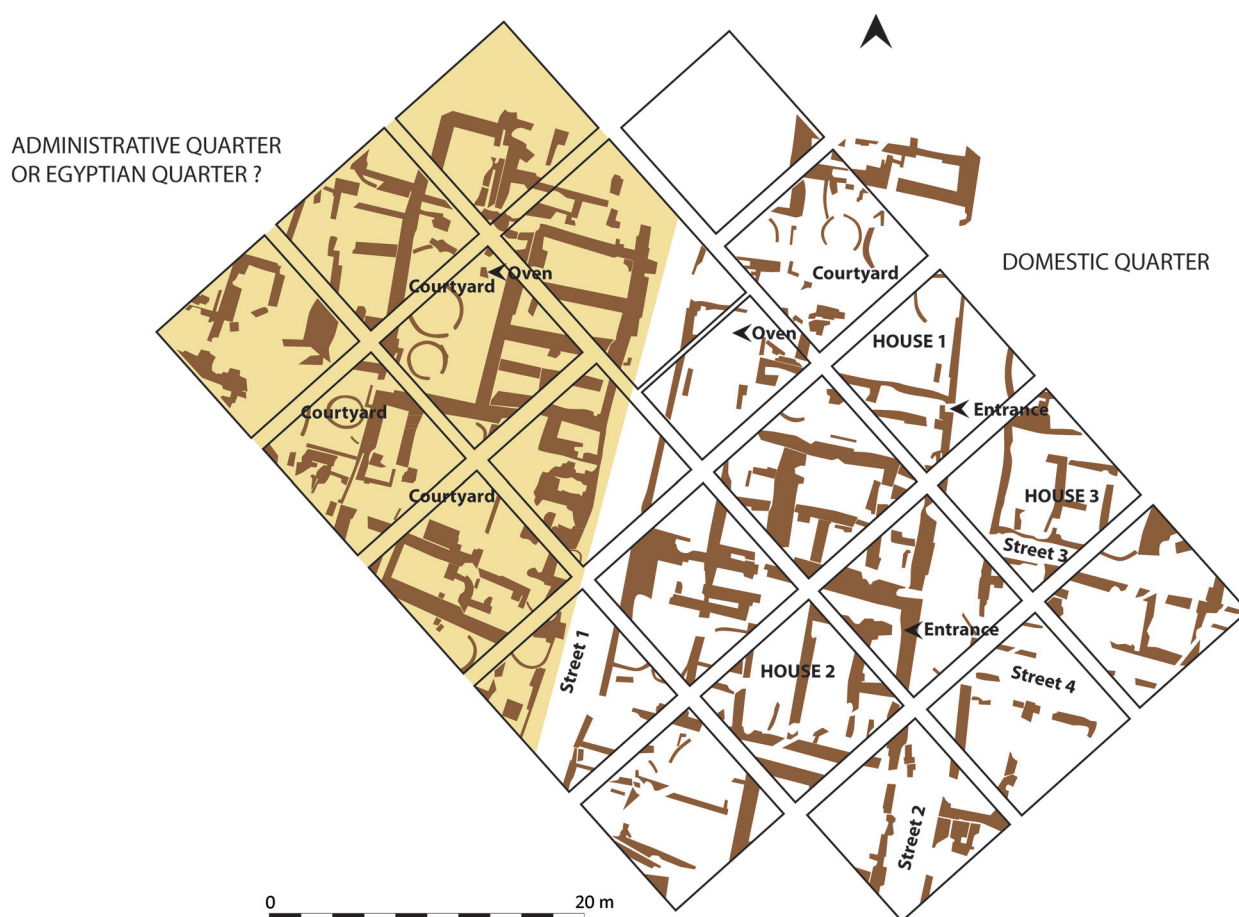


Fig. 6 The settlement of the Hyksos Period in area R/III near 'Ezbet Rushdi (after FORSTNER-MÜLLER *et al.* 2015, Fig. 3, redrawn)

ers of the Hyksos Period are not preserved anymore, the deep reaching trenches of tomb chambers would have been found. However, only pits with settlement waste appeared, among them a pit of the 13th Dynasty with an impression of a seal of a mayor of Avaris with the Egyptian name of Imeny-seneb-nefer from the time of the 13th Dynasty (Fig. 4).²⁴ It is no coincidence that this seal with the Egyptian name of Imeny-seneb-nefer turned up within the precinct of the core of the Egyptian town of 'Ezbet Rushdi at a time when the settlement had already been occupied, to a large extent, by population of Near Eastern origin. It seems that the administration during the 13th Dynasty was still under Egyptian authority. I shall show in the following that the Egyptian part of the population of Avaris was not only contained within the area of the ancient city walls of 'Ezbet Rushdi but was able to expand its habitation area towards the south on territory already held by the newcomers from the Near East.

²⁴ CZERNY 2001, 13–26.

In a recent excavation (2010–2015), the Austrian Archaeological Institute uncovered, south of the planned settlement of the Middle Kingdom at 'Ezbet Rushdi, a settlement which started with the early Hyksos Period and continued until the end of the SIP (Figs. 5–6).²⁵ At least three settlement blocks were partly uncovered in this area. Two straight regular streets, each c. 5 m wide, separated them. The westernmost block (Complex 1), which was still in continuation of the Middle Kingdom town of 'Ezbet Rushdi, within the extension of the demarcation line of the eastern town wall, was without any tombs. In the neighbouring house block (Complex 2) to the east, separated by 'Street 1,' some tombs were present, one of them a mudbrick chamber tomb. Another quarter (Complex 3), at the east of this excavation area, revealed smaller houses with tombs. Complexes 2 and 3 were therefore occupied by Canaanites. As far as this limited evidence goes, it shows that the population of the quarter of the old town of 'Ezbet

²⁵ FORSTNER-MÜLLER & ROSE 2012/13; FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2014; FORSTNER-MÜLLER *et al.* 2015.

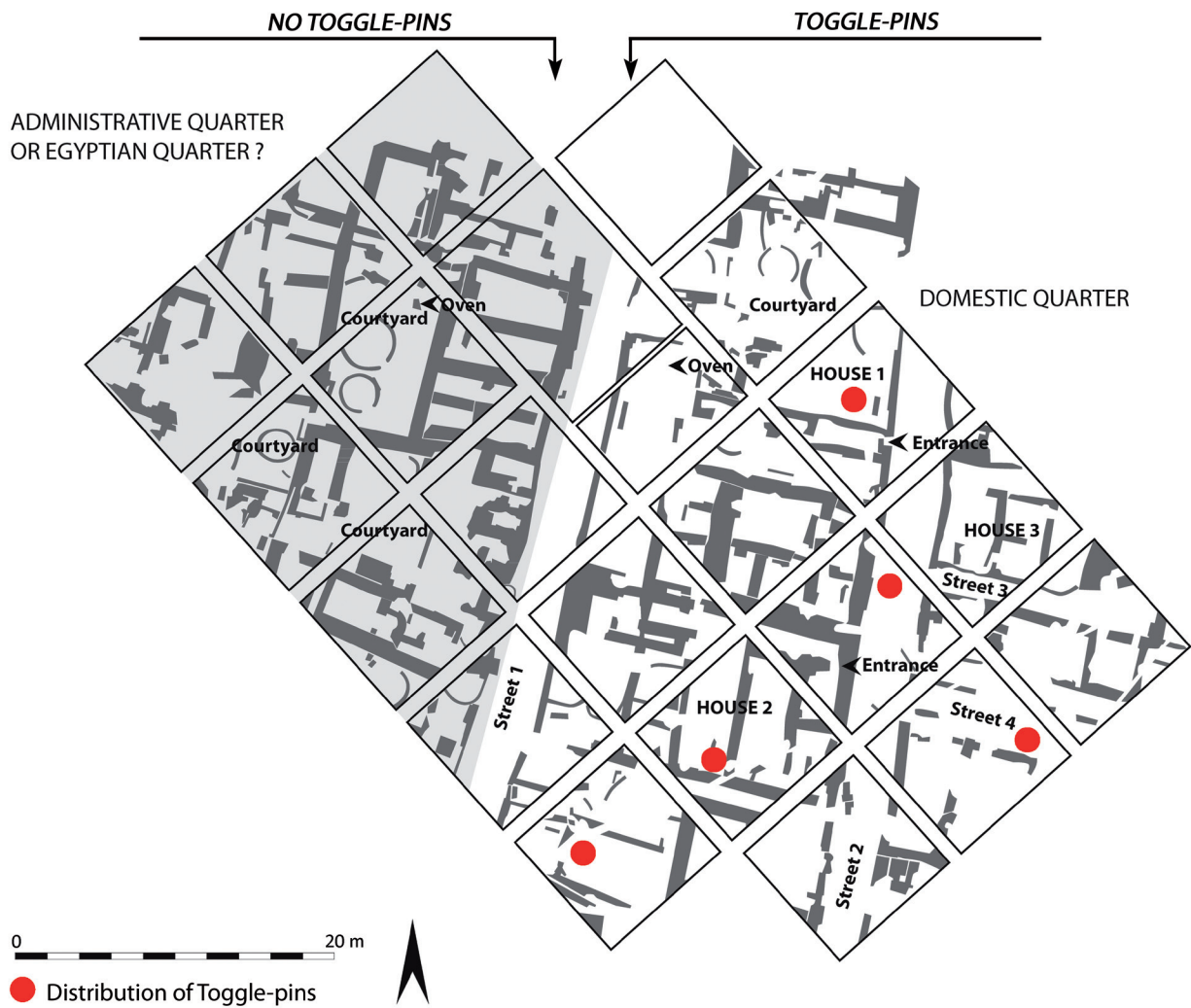


Fig. 7 The distribution of toggle-pin-finds in area R/III (after FORSTNER-MÜLLER *et al.* 2015, 34, Kartierung 3, redrawn)

Rushdi, which we consider to be Egyptians, was able to expand on territory formerly occupied by Near Easterners outside the original limits of the Egyptian town.

As many of the seal impressions, among them several seals of the Hyksos Khayan, had been found within the precincts, the excavators cautiously explain that because of lack of intramural burials, Complex 1 may have been an administrative quarter. Closer inspection of the evidence, however, leaves room for an alternative interpretation.

The architecture of the building complexes involved shows no systematically constructed units as one would expect for an administrative district. Instead, one could identify sub-units that look like houses with courtyards, one exception of which encompass silos; the exception contained

remains of ovens. Otherwise, the units of this complex show all the signs of households with individual arrangements and unit sizes between c. 100 to 150 m². An evaluation of the distribution patterns of small finds, which are offered meticulously by the excavation team, is equally interesting.²⁶ As is explicitly mentioned, there are hardly any original floors preserved and the plotted finds could also belong to a previous building phase, but this would not change the conclusion of the distribution patterns as the previous building phases led functionally to the final settlement situation in the late Hyksos Period. Complex 1 shows similar distribution patterns of domestic artefacts such as sickle blades, mortars, loom-weights, beads, game-stones as the other two complexes. Also the distribution of seal impressions seems to be similar in all three complexes. What is, however, most

²⁶ FORSTNER-MÜLLER *et al.* 2015, Kartierung 1–8, figs. 51–54.



Fig. 8 The sacred precinct in Area A/II with Near-Eastern and Egyptian shrines (after BRETAK 2006, 61, Fig. 34, redrawn)

conspicuous is the absence of toggle pins in Complex 1 and the presence of three toggle pins in neighbouring Complex 2, one from Street 2 between Complexes 2 and 3 and one from Complex 3 (Fig. 7). As the toggle pin is an ethnic marker and was used to hold together the garment of the Canaanite dress on the left shoulder, this evidence supports our suspicion that Complex 1 was used by Egyptians and Complexes 2 and 3 by the population of Western Asiatic settlers at Avaris.

As we are just south of the settlement at °Ezbet Rushdi, which was purely Egyptian not only in the Middle Kingdom but also subsequently, it gives more sense to assume, for this excavated part, that it was a settlement of Egyptians who needed more space and started to occupy the area outside their original town at °Ezbet Rushdi. If the underlying areas of the early Hyksos Period had tombs or not, cannot be definitively verified without more extended excavation. A test trench at the west edge of this excavation area revealed for the early Hyksos Period smaller houses with burials. If this is the case, it would not contradict the interpretation that Egyptians living in Avaris occupied this space in the second part of the Hyksos Period. They could have bought the land from previous inhabitants of Canaanite origin. The proximity to °Ezbet Rushdi would favour such an interpretation.

Taking the interment of tombs within the settlement as ethnic marker for Canaanite settlement and the separation of the funerary and domestic spheres as a marker for Egyptians would show that the Asiatic community at Avaris did not expel Egyptians living previously at this site. On the contrary, the fact that the Egyptian community could keep their identity and were even able to expand their building ground shows that they were respected and had even some influence. It seems likely that they were employed because of their skills in the administration of the Hyksos which shows in the number of seal impressions in their quarter and the nearby environment.

The Egyptian community in Avaris seems to have contributed to a syncretism between Canaanite and Egyptian cult and religion. This could be concluded from the temple precinct in A/II from the time of the 14th and 15th Dynasties (c. 1730 – 1530 BC).²⁷ The two main temples, a Near Eastern type of a *broad-room-shrine* (Temple III) and an Egyptian shrine (Temple V) stand side by side (Fig. 8). There is also a Near Eastern *bent-axis-temple* integrated to the precinct of Temple III. The temples are surrounded by cemeteries with Egyptian mortuary chapels, but the burials were of Canaanites with toggle pins and partly Near Eastern weaponry. It remains to be seen if one of these cemeteries, which are not all excavated belonged to the Egyptian community.



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²⁷ BIETAK 1991, fig. 2; BIETAK 1996, 36–48, figs. 30, 31, 39; FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, fig. p. 19.

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