



PHARAOH'S LAND AND BEYOND

Ancient Egypt
and Its Neighbors

Pharaoh's Land and Beyond

ANCIENT EGYPT AND ITS NEIGHBORS

Edited by Pearce Paul Creasman
and
Richard H. Wilkinson

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations vii

List of Plates xv

Acknowledgments xvii

List of Contributors xix

Introduction 1

PEARCE PAUL CREASMAN AND RICHARD H. WILKINSON

SECTION I: } **Pathways**

1. Finding the Beyond: Exploration 5

THOMAS SCHNEIDER

2. Paths in the Deep: Maritime Connections 19

PEARCE PAUL CREASMAN AND NOREEN DOYLE

3. Pathways to Distant Kingdoms: Land Connections 35

GREGORY MUMFORD

SECTION II: } **People**

4. Children of Other Gods: Social Interactions 61

BETTINA BADER

5. Between Brothers: Diplomatic Interactions 79

RICHARD H. WILKINSON AND NOREEN DOYLE

6. The Armies of Re 93

ANTHONY SPALINGER

SECTION III: } **Objects**

7. The Long Arm of Merchantry: Trade Interactions 115

SAMUEL MARK

8. Artisans and Their Products: Interaction in Art and Architecture 133

STUART TYSON SMITH

9. Traded, Copied, and Kept: The Ubiquitous Appeal of Scarabs 149

VANESSA BOSCHLOOS

SECTION IV: } **Ideas**

10. **Technology in Transit: The Borrowing of Ideas in Science and Craftwork** 167
IAN SHAW
11. **The Flow of Words: Interaction in Writing and Literature during the Bronze Age**
I Writing Systems: Cuneiform and Hieroglyphs in the Bronze Age—
Script Contact and the Creation of New Scripts 183
ORLY GOLDWASSER
II Literature: Egyptian and Levantine *Belles-Lettres*—Links and
Influences during the Bronze Age 195
NOGA AYALI-DARSHAN
12. **All Gods Are Our Gods: Religious Interaction**
I “From Bes to Baal”: Religious Interconnections between
Egypt and the East 209
IZAK CORNELIUS
II Egypt and Nubia 219
KATHRYN HOWLEY
III Religious Interaction between Egypt and the Aegean in
the Second Millennium BCE 229
NANNO MARINATOS

SECTION V: } **Events**

13. **Violence in Earth, Water, and Sky: Geological Hazards** 241
JAMES A. HARRELL
14. **The Fickle Nile: Effects of Droughts and Floods** 257
JUDITH BUNBURY
15. **Illness from Afar: Epidemics and Their Aftermath** 271
ROSALIE DAVID
- References and Further Reading 287
Index 333
Main Index 335

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1.1 Map showing the chain of archaeological sites along the Abu Ballas trail. From F. Förster, 2013, “Beyond Dakhla: The Abu Ballas Trail in the Libyan Desert (SW Egypt),” in F. Förster and H. Riemer (eds.), *Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond, Africa Praehistorica* 27, Köln: Heinrich-Barth-Institut, 2013, p. 298 fig. 1. **Image courtesy of Frank Förster/Heinrich Barth Institute, Cologne.** 7
- 1.2 Lapis lazuli inlay in the form of a falcon. New Kingdom. Henry Walters, Baltimore [date and mode of acquisition unknown]; Walters Art Museum, 1931, by bequest. **Image courtesy of The Walters Art Museum.** 8
- 1.3 The expedition leader, Iny. **Image courtesy Michele Marcolin.** 10
- 1.4 Part of a topographical list. Luxor Temple, New Kingdom. **Photograph courtesy Pearce Paul Creasman.** 15
- 2.1 The earliest known depiction of a sail on an Egyptian painted pot. Probably Naqada IIc. After W. F. Petrie, *Prehistoric Egypt* (London, British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1920), pl. XXIII.3. 20
- 2.2 Commemoration of an Egyptian victory in Nubia. Petroglyph at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman, near the Second Cataract (Nubia). Probably First Dynasty. After T. A. H. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London: Routledge, 1999), 178, fig. 5.3. 21
- 2.3 The jetty at Wadi el-Jarf on the Egyptian Red Sea coast. Fourth Dynasty. From P. Tallet, “The Wadi el-Jarf Site: A Harbor of Khufu on the Red Sea,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 5(1) (2013), p. 81, fig. 6. **Photograph courtesy Pierre Tallet.** 24
- 2.4 Boat built of imported cedar. From the pyramid complex of Senwosret III at Dahshur, now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo; Twelfth Dynasty. **Photograph courtesy Pearce Paul Creasman.** 27
- 2.5 Syrian merchant ships arriving at an Egyptian market. Wall painting from Theban Tomb 162 (Kenamun); Eighteenth Dynasty. After N. de G. Davies and R. O. Faulkner, “A Syrian Trading Venture in Egypt,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 33 (1948), pl. VIII. 31
- 3.1 Establishing a military campsite; from Horemheb’s Memphite tomb. After G. T. Martin, *The Hidden Tombs of Memphis: New Discoveries from the Time of Tutankhamun* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 56 fig. 21. **Drawing by G. Mumford.** 50

- 3.2 A&B: Sety I's north Sinai forts and way stations. From Karnak temple. Adapted from A. H. Gardiner, "The Ancient Military Road between Egypt and Palestine," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 6 (1920), pls. 11–12. **Drawing by G. Mumford.** 52–53
- 3.3 Ramesside papyrus map of the Wadi Hammamat. Adapted from S. Sidebotham, M. Hense, and H. Nouwens, *The Red Land: The Illustrated Archaeology of Egypt's Eastern Desert* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 65 fig. 4.3. **Drawing by G. Mumford and C. Childs.** 54
- 4.1 Slaying of the enemies. Karnak temple. **Photograph by Bettina Bader.** 67
- 4.2 Slain enemies. Karnak temple. **Photograph by Bettina Bader.** 68
- 4.3 Counting the hands of the fallen enemies. Medinet Habu. **Photograph by Bettina Bader.** 69
- 4.4 Libyans. Medinet Habu. **Photograph by Bettina Bader.** 75
- 5.1 Stela commemorating the marriage of Ramesses II and the daughter of the Hittite king Hattusili: directed at a domestic audience, the iconography and text affirm Egypt's superiority. Note that even in the presence of her father the princess is already Egyptianized. Great Temple of Rameses II, Abu Simbel; Nineteenth Dynasty, reign of Ramesses II. Detail from C. R. Lepsius, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, Abtheilung III, *Denkmaeler des Neuen Reichs* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1853), Bl. 196. 81
- 5.2 One of the Amarna Letters (EA 27), from Tushratta of Mitanni to Akhenaten of Egypt, reminding the pharaoh of his obligations. **Creative Commons "VAM - Tuschratta von Mitanni.jpg" by Wolfgang Sauber** (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:VAM_-_Tuschratta_von_Mitanni.jpg>); licensed under CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>>). 86
- 6.1 Pharaoh Sety I against Yenoam (east Canaan). Northern exterior wall of the hypostyle hall at Karnak; east side, second register. **Photograph courtesy Peter Brand.** 103
- 6.2 Pharaoh Ramesses II in Syria fighting the fortress-citadel of Dapur. Ramesseum. **Photograph courtesy Peter Brand.** 105
- 7.1 Map of Egypt and Sinai, showing sites mentioned in the text. **Drawn by Samuel Mark.** 116
- 7.2 Map of the eastern Mediterranean, showing sites mentioned in the text. **Drawn by Samuel Mark.** 118
- 7.3 Map of Nubia, showing sites mentioned in the text. **Drawn by Samuel Mark.** 119
- 8.1 Kerma cemetery *deffufa* K-II with winged sun disk carved in relief on the fallen granite lintel (photo by author). **Photograph by Stuart Tyson Smith.** 136

- 8.2 Heads from locally made New Kingdom ceramic and wooden coffins at Tombos. **Photograph by Stuart Tyson Smith.** 141
- 8.3 Wearing the Kushite cap-crown and amulets of Amun as a ram, Pharaoh Tanutamun is led toward Isis by Imsety, one of the Four Sons of Horus, in a scene from the entrance chamber of the underground burial complex of his pyramid tomb at el-Kurru, near Napata. **Photograph by Stuart Tyson Smith.** 143
- 8.4 A–I, Amulets from burials at Tombos, all but G from the Third Intermediate Period; B, C, E, F, and H found together (A, eye of Horus; B, Isis suckling Horus and wearing the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt; C, Isis suckling Horus and wearing a horned crown with sun disk and uraei; D, Bat-Hathor with lotus and uraeus crown; E, Pataikos/Isis; F, Bes from the Third Intermediate Period; G, Bes from the New Kingdom; H, scarab with unusual offering scene; I, heart scarab; and J, a monumental Bes column from Taharqa’s rock-cut Temple B-300 at Gebel Barkal. **Photographs by Stuart Tyson Smith.** 145
- 8.5 Figure of Syrian deity, perhaps Ba’al or Reshef, in bronze with gold and silver overlay. New Kingdom. **Courtesy the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, <<http://www.lacma.org>>.** 147
- 9.1 Clay bulla impressed by a scarab bearing the name of Thutmose III, excavated in Carthage by A. L. Delattre (1850–1932). Digital photograph (above) and four 2D+ models (below) generated by the Portable Light Dome system (<<https://portablelightdome.wordpress.com/>>), from left to right: color sharpen, shaded, radiance scaling, and sketch mode. © **Royal Museums of Art and History Brussels, inv. O. 4825.** 150
- 9.2 Canaanite Middle Bronze Age scarabs excavated by W. M. F. Petrie at Tell el-Yahudiya. © **Royal Museums of Art and History Brussels, inv. E.2564, E.2566, E.2567.** 157
- 9.3 Faience scarab manufactured at Beth Shean (belonging to the so-called Beth Shean Level IX Group), bearing the inscription *s’nh jmn* or *’nh.ś n jmn*. Private collection. From D. Ben-Tor and O. Keel, “The Beth-Shean Level IX-Group: A Local Scarab Workshop of the Late Bronze Age I,” in *All the Wisdom of the East: Studies in Near Eastern Archaeology and History in Honor of Eliezer D. Oren*, ed. Mayer Gruber, Shmuel Ahituv, Gunnar Lehmann, and Zipora Talshir (Fribourg: Academic Press/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), fig. 25. **Photographs courtesy of Othmar Keel.** 159
- 9.4 Phoenician scarab in *gemasertem Steatit* from Dülük Köyü. Gaziantep Museum, inv. 35.2.86. **Photographs courtesy of Günther Hölbl.** 161

- 9.5 Dark blue paste scarab of the “Naukratis type” found in the Temple of Aphrodite at Miletus. Miletus Museum, inv. 3200. From G. Hölbl, “Funde aus Milet, VIII: Die Aegyptiaca vom Aphroditetempel auf dem Zeytintepe,” *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1999 (1999), abb. 10. **Photographs courtesy of Günther Hölbl.** 161
- 11.1 Left: An early Egyptian serekh of an unknown king, possibly *Horus *N.j-N.jt*, incised on a jar from Helwan. After C. E. Köhler and Edwin C. M. van den Brink, “Four Jars with Incised Serekh-Signs from Helwan Recently Retrieved from the Cairo Museum,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 187 (2002), fig. 2.2. Right: A Proto-literate seal from Sin Temple, Khafajah (Mesopotamia). After P. Amiet, *La glyptique Mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1980), pl. 26, no. 427. 184
- 11.2 Examples of early writing. Left: An early Sumerian clay tablet. The bull’s head and the other signs are of the same size. After C. Woods, Christopher, “Earliest Mesopotamian Writing,” in *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond*, ed. Christopher Woods, Geoff Emberling, and Emily Teeter (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), p. 71 fig. 41 (obverse). Right: Proto-dynastic Egyptian bone tag from tomb U-J at Abydos. The mountain ridge and the snake are of the same size. After G. Dreyer and U. Hartung, *Umm el-Qaab I. Das prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1998), no. 143. 184
- 11.3 The reduction of iconicity: the cuneiform script. After J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 70 fig. 31. 186
- 11.4 Left: Old Syrian Dynastic seals depicting king receiving *ankh* from goddess or god. Right: Syrian seal depicting Canaanite goddesses holding an *ankh* sign in the wrong way, upside-down. After Teissier 1996, p. 51, fig. 11 (private collection). After B. Teissier, *Egyptian Iconography on Syro-Palestinian Cylinder Seals of the Middle Bronze Age* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1996), (left) 27 no. 184 (private collection) and (right) 51 fig. 11 (private collection). 187
- 11.5 Left: The Phaistos Disk, a unique find showing highly iconic Cretan hieroglyphs. All hieroglyphs are in the same direction and of the same scale. L. Godart, *Il disco di Festo. L’enigma di una scrittura* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1994), 53. Right: Anatolian hieroglyphs from Karkemish. After A. Payne, *Hieroglyphic Luwian: An Introduction with Original Texts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 59. 188

- 11.6 Left: The development of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin letters from the Proto-Sinaitic letters. After O. Goldwasser “How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36(2) (2012), 16. Right: A Proto-Sinaitic inscription from Serabit el-Khadim, Sinai. The inscription is to be read in the “wrong” direction according to Egyptian reading rules. After G. J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006), 339. 191
- 12.1 Egyptianizing cylinder seal from north Syrian Alalakh eighteenth/seventeenth centuries BCE (BM ME 132487). Local ruler with Egyptian deities (Montu and Khnum) and *ankh* signs and two crowned falcons. From S. Schroer, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/ Israels und der Alte Orient: Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern II* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 2010), #322. **Drawing courtesy Silvia Schroer, Bern.** 212
- 12.2 Limestone stela from Byblos, height 1.13 m., fifth cent. BCE (Louvre). King Yehawmilk of Byblos and the “lady of Byblos” on an Egyptian throne with papyrus scepter and headdress of Hathor (sun disk and horns); above is a winged sun disk. **Drawing courtesy Martin Leuenberger, Tübingen.** 213
- 12.3 Ivory from Megiddo, Late Bronze Age (Chicago A 22214): Bes with feather crown. From S. Schroer, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/ Israels und der Alte Orient: Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern III* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 2011), #779. **Drawing courtesy Silvia Schroer, Bern.** 214
- 12.4 Limestone stela from Deir el-Medina, height 75 cm. Nineteenth Dynasty (BM EA 191). Naked Levantine goddess Qedeshet on lion flanked by Egyptian god Min and Levantine god Reshef, below worshippers with armed Levantine goddess Anat. **Photo © Trustees of the British Museum, with thanks.** 216
- 12.5 The remains of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty royal pyramid tombs at Kurru, Sudan. **Kite photograph by Kathryn Howley.** 224
- 12.6 A winged Egyptian goddess depicted on a golden “cylinder sheath” of King Aspelta, buried at Nuri in Sudan c. 580 BCE. Sudan National Museum 1371. **Photograph by Kathryn Howley.** 225
- 12.7 Sacral Knot. After A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos* 2.1 (London: Macmillan, 1928), 284 fig. 168. 231
- 12.8 The sign of the two mountains of the horizon: a. Minoan; b. Egyptian. After N. Marinatos, *Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess: A Near Eastern Koine* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 107. 232

- 12.9 Vase from Pseira, Crete. After P. B. Betancourt and C. Davaras, *Pseira I: The Minoan Building on the West Side of Area A* (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1995), 35, fig. 16. 232
- 12.10 Seal impression from Zakros. From F. Matz, H. Biesantz, and I. Pini (eds.), *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel. Band 2. Iraklion, Archäologisches Museum. Teil 3. Die Siegelabdrücke von Kato Zakros: unter Einbeziehung von Funden aus anderen Museen* (Berlin: Akademie der Literatur und Wissenschaften, 1984), 7, 172. 233
- 12.11 Ram-headed deity from KV 14, W. Thebes. After E. Hornung, *The Valley of the Kings: Horizon of Eternity* (New York: Timken, 1990), 93. 234
- 12.12a Taweret controlling the leg of Seth. Ceiling of the temple of Isis at Philae; Ptolemaic Period. After R. H. Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 74. 235
- 12.12b Minoan seal now in Berlin. From I. Pini (ed.), *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel XI, Kleinere europäische Sammlungen* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1988), 38. 235
- 13.1 Rotated block probably caused by an earthquake in the unfinished Twelfth Dynasty sandstone temple of Qasr el-Sagha in the northern Fayum Desert. **Photograph by James A. Harrell.** 244
- 13.2 The northern Memnon Colossus at Kom el-Hetan, showing the Roman repair of earthquake damage (the cut and fitted blocks in the torso) to the originally monolithic silicified sandstone (quartzite) statue of Amenhotep III. **Photograph by James A. Harrell.** 245
- 13.3 Wooden dovetail clamp joining two sandstone blocks in the Eighteenth Dynasty Montu temple at Karnak. Length of the exposed part of the clamp is 24 cm. **Photograph courtesy V. Max Brown.** 246
- 13.4 Multiple mortises for dovetail clamps in sandstone blocks of the Late Period quay on the west side of Karnak temple. Scale is 30 cm long. **Photograph courtesy Robert E. Mittelstaedt.** 249
- 13.5 The north end of Sadd el-Kafara, an early Old Kingdom flood-control dam in Wadi Garawi, near Helwan. The view is down the wadi, looking at the upstream side of the dam. **Photograph by James A. Harrell.** 251
- 13.6 The Sheikh Abd el-Qurna slump block with the Theban escarpment, from which it slid, at left. **Photograph by James A. Harrell.** 252
- 14.1 Map of Egypt showing areas mentioned in the text. **Drawing by Judith Bunbury.** 258

- 14.2 Nile god with sixteen *putti*, representing the fertility of a sixteen-cubit rise of the Nile during the flood. **Photograph by F. Bucher**, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VaticanMuseums_Statue_of_River_Nile.jpg>; **Creative Commons—Attribution 2.5 Generic** (<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/deed.en>>). 261
- 14.3 Sketch after a figure on the Narmer mace head: the king symbolically carrying a hoe. **Drawing by Judith Bunbury after an image taken by the Ashmolean Museum.** 262
- 14.4 Plan of meander bends in the Nile Valley near Abydos, showing the constraints of the desert canyon, the meander pattern of the Nile, the thin dark lines that follow roads and *hōd* (field) boundaries that indicate the direction of migration of the Nile (shown with arrows). **Drawing by Judith Bunbury.** 265
- 14.5 Diagram of Egyptian village in the Nile floodplain showing the dense irregular street patterns of the old settlement that has formed a *kôm* (dark gray shading), newer development (pale gray), and the remaining cultivation (unshaded). New development tends to following the field plot system and has a straighter more regular road pattern. **Drawing by Judith Bunbury.** 269
- 15.1 The mummy of Ramesses V (Twentieth Dynasty), unwrapped in 1905. Immunological techniques have confirmed a tentative diagnosis of smallpox made on the basis of cutaneous vesicles observed on the face (seen here) and elsewhere on the body. Cairo Museum. From G. E. Smith, *The Royal Mummies, Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1912), pl. LVI. **Copyright Robert B. Partridge/Peartree Design.** 277
- 15.2 The mummy of Siptah (Nineteenth Dynasty), showing a shortening of the left leg and gross deformity of the ankle. Cairo Museum. From G. E. Smith, *The Royal Mummies, Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1912), pl. LXII, fig. 1. **Copyright Robert B. Partridge/Peartree Design.** 278
- 15.3 When the mummy of Siptah (Nineteenth Dynasty) was unwrapped in 1905, the deformity evident in the left leg and foot was identified as a case of congenital clubfoot (*talipes equino-varus*). More recent radiological studies indicate a neuromuscular disease, possibly poliomyelitis. Cairo Museum. From G. E. Smith, *The Royal Mummies, Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1912), pl. LXII, fig. 2. **Copyright Robert B. Partridge/Peartree Design.** 279

- 15.4 Statue of the lioness-headed goddess, Sekhmet, feared as the bringer of plagues and epidemics to Egypt. She was worshipped as a principal deity of medicine, in order to placate her anger. Eighteenth Dynasty. World Museum, Liverpool. **Copyright J. Peter Phillips/Peartree Design.** 281

III }

Religious Interaction between Egypt and the Aegean in the Second Millennium BCE

Nanno Marinatos

It is well-accepted fact that Egypt was the dominant high culture in the eastern Mediterranean for almost three thousand years and that her influence reached the Aegean already during the third millennium BCE. However, the Egyptian impact was not equally strong during all periods of history. It depended on various factors, of which the level of political unity within Egypt, the stability of institutions in Crete, and the compatibility of religious ideas as conceived by the ruling dynasties are important. If these factors are taken into consideration, it is no great wonder that the peak of Egypto-Minoan contacts coincided with two powerful dynasties in Egypt, the twelfth and the eighteenth; the corresponding periods are important also for the palace at Knossos, since they mark its foundation and expansion: there is thus a correlation between Egyptianizing features in Cretan art and religion and strong kingship in both lands.

What conclusions may we draw from this? It will be suggested that a visual and religious vocabulary that included features common to both cultures was created early on; and that such a visual vocabulary would have been a useful tool for inter-state diplomacy. A “club of great powers,” as one scholar has put it, needs a language of communication even on the religious level (van de Mieroop 2003, pp. 121–40).

That religion was used for international diplomacy is made clear in the Amarna correspondence where we learn that statuettes of gods were transferred from one royal court to the next. The Mitanni king Tushratta sent his daughter as a bride to pharaoh Amenhotep IV together with an image of the Hurrian-Hittite goddess Shauska. It is reported in the letter that the goddess said: “I wish to go to Egypt, a country that I love, and then return” (EA 23; Moran 1987, p. 61). Conversely, we learn from another letter that Aman (that is, Amun) was asked to bless Tushratta with good fortune (EA 20; Moran 1987,

p. 48). It is clear that the gods of Mitanni were perceived as having the power to bless the people of Egypt and vice versa.

Of course, a foreign religious element may also be an impediment to state policy, in which case a king may choose to isolate himself from the cult practices and symbols of his neighbors and to claim divine support for his decision. In the *Book of Kings*, God warns his favorite king Solomon *not* to accept other gods. "The Lord was angry with Solomon because he not only married many foreign wives but followed their gods" (1 Kings 11:5–9; Graf 2004, pp. 3–16 at 6). Religious osmosis, then, is not to be taken for granted but depends on the tone of the political climate, on the one hand, and personal contacts between royal houses, on the other.

The question may arise: do we have any evidence regarding the relation of Egyptian pharaohs and Cretan kings? Indeed, we do. A statuette of an Egyptian official inscribed with the name "User" (Twelfth or early Thirteenth Dynasty, Middle Minoan II B stratum) was found by Arthur Evans at Knossos. User may have visited the Knossian king and may have left his likeness as a gift and a remembrance of his visit. If this is indeed what happened, it is almost certain that User brought with him other precious objects, among which may have been amulets and symbols of protective divinities.

Another royal contact between Egypt and Crete occurred when the Hyksos pharaoh Khayan (Khyan) of the Second Intermediate Period (equivalent to Middle Minoan III) was in power. Note that he was a powerful king who successfully reunited Egypt, and for this reason it is reasonable to suppose that he sought relations with allies abroad, especially a naval power such as Knossos. Khayan sent his Knossian colleague a stone vase inscribed with his cartouche, a personal gift that no doubt represents an act of good will and possibly cemented an agreement between the two royal houses. Did Khayan send many other gifts besides, including religious objects? This is, of course, pure speculation. And yet there is very strong evidence that the island was receptive to Egyptian religious ideas during the First as well as the Second Palace Periods, and we shall return to this topic shortly.

But first we must note that ideas are not likely to travel through the mere exchange of objects, or trade. Religious syncretism becomes most easily embedded in a tradition when there is official recognition of foreign deities. We may imagine various acts of performance encouraged and organized by the palaces: song, dance, processions, and recitals of mythical texts. Many of these would have been carried out in the courts, and as I have argued elsewhere, the Minoan king and his queen would have performed the role of high priests, a role that is well paralleled in Hittite and Egyptian societies.

This is a useful frame to problematize Cretan religion and its relation to Egyptian but what is the actual evidence? The most striking proof that foreign ideas were accepted on the level of official religion is the incorporation of Egyptian ideograms and pictograms in the hieroglyphic script of the First

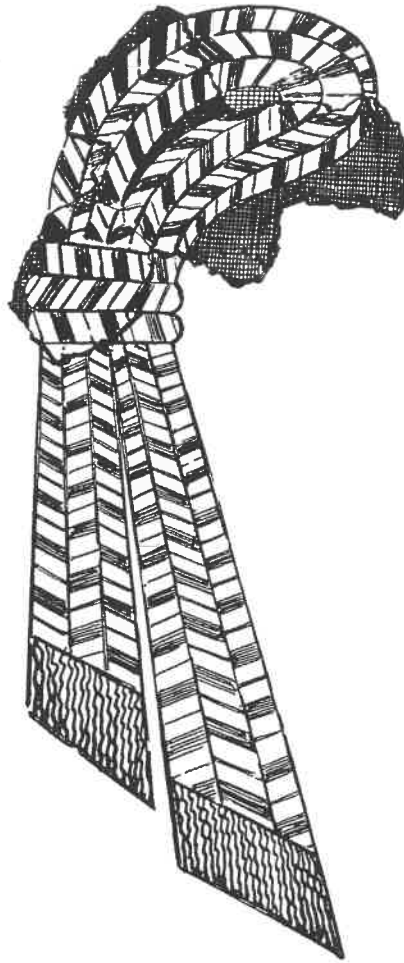


FIGURE 12.7 Sacral Knot.

Palace Period. Consider first the Egyptian ankh. We know that it signifies “life” in Egypt, but its form is too abstract to be comprehended without explication. It is therefore more than likely that the meaning of the sign was transferred along with its form. During the Second Palace period, a fetish of religious significance was developed by the Minoans, the so-called sacral knot (fig. 12.7). It is a folded piece of cloth that forms a loop at the top and either stands on its own or constitutes an adornment of royal and priestly garments. It also bears a resemblance to the Egyptian fetish known as “knot of Isis” or “blood of Isis” (pl. 9); on the basis of this, it seems quite certain that Egyptian and Minoan ideas converged both during the Twelfth and during the Eighteenth Dynasties.

Another Minoan hieroglyph of the First Palace Period is likely to have derived from Egypt: the sign of the horizon, the *akhet* (fig. 12.8). Oddly enough, Evans did not recognize the Minoan sign as such and interpreted it instead as the horns of a bull. This explanation has prevailed in the literature and has sent many researchers in the wrong direction to look for concepts of bull-worship or sacrifice. And yet, the similarity between the Minoan and Egyptian sign is too striking for coincidence. Besides, if the so-called sacral horns represent the twin peaks of the horizon, this might explain why the Minoan objects (made

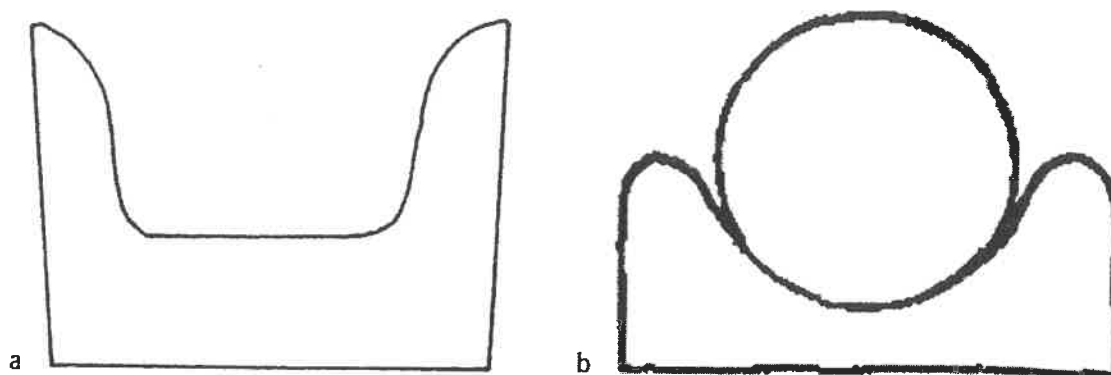


FIGURE 12.8 The sign of the two mountains of the horizon: a. Minoan; b. Egyptian.



FIGURE 12.9 Vase from Pseira, Crete.

of stone or clay) were consistently placed high up, on top of buildings. As in Egypt, Minoan sacred buildings represent aspects of the cosmos, and what is high up is considered to be close to the sky. The point cannot be belabored here any further, but suffice it to say that it is not just the similarity of form between the Minoan and Egyptian signs that is suggestive but also their location.

Having just argued that the so-called sacred horns in Minoan art and religion represent the Egyptian idea of the horizon akhet, I will admit that Evans had also seen something very important when he spoke of sacral horns, because although the twin peaks are not horns (for reasons delineated above), it is nevertheless true that the U-shape of the Egyptian akhet resembles the horns of an ox. It is also true that the head of the ox plays a role in Minoan religious symbolism. Its Egyptian origins will become evident, but first we must look at some examples of animal heads in Minoan art and reflect on their meaning.

On a vase from Pseira, dating to Late Minoan I (early Eighteenth Dynasty), the main scene shows a series of bovine heads among olive sprays (fig. 12.9). In between the horns of each animal head is a double ax, the emblem of the Minoan divinity. That this scene is symbolic, rather than naturalistic, cannot be doubted. Its most stunning feature is the dual identity of the double ax as an object and a lily plant simultaneously. But also the ox head deserves attention, since it is obvious that it could *not* represent the head of a sacrificed animal

in the above scene: its eyes are wide open and it bears the double ax and lily between its horns. A clue as to its significance is supplied by a scene on a gold ring of Cretan origin found in the Peloponnese, at Vapheio. A ritual takes place near a sacred tree; in the center is a dancing woman performing a twirl, and, above her, we see the ox head. Whatever our interpretation of the ritual by the tree (this author has suggested an ecstatic dance leading to prophetic visions), the animal head above the dancing female requires some explanation. And there is no way to escape the conclusion that the ox head is a divine sign in heaven, since next to it we see a shooting star (or comet) as well as the sacral knot/ankh. It will be argued next that the ox head has Egyptian origins and refers to the divine cow or bull in heaven.

Since the Pyramid Age, the Egyptians believed that a cow goddess of the flood, Mehet-Weret, gave birth to the sun god and carried the disk as a crown between her horns. She eventually assimilated with Neith, Hathor, and Isis during the Eighteenth Dynasty. Hathor bears the solar disk between her horns, and so does the bull of Re. Is this iconographical scheme not reminiscent of the Minoan ox head bearing the divine emblem of the double ax on the Pseira vase (fig. 12.9)? If so, this motif bears the ineluctable stamp of Egyptian religion.

Consider next a glyptic scene on a seal impression from Zakros where a ram's head is flanked by two birds (a sign of the heavenly realm); above the head is a sacred object that looks like a budding pair of horns; above the latter is a solar disk that constitutes the center of the composition (fig. 12.10). Because of its cryptic nature, this strange iconography cannot be read without decipherment. Behind its conception is Egyptian astral theology because the ram and the sun disk are associated in Egyptian religious iconography where a ram deity carries the solar disk between his horns and embodies the nocturnal manifestation of



FIGURE 12.10 Seal impression from Zakros.

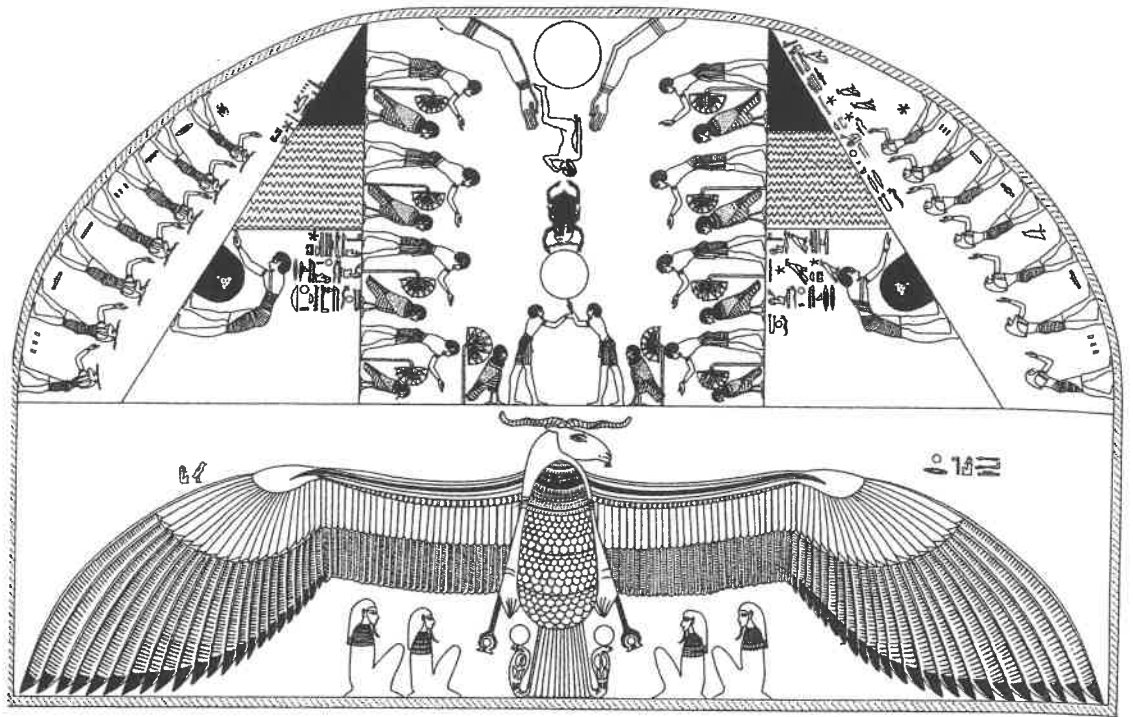


FIGURE 12.11 Ram-headed deity from KV 14, W. Thebes.

Re as Osiris. One example of this ram deity is furnished by tomb KV,14 (originally built for the last ruler of the Nineteenth Dynasty, Queen Tausret); it takes the form of a creature, a bird with spread wings and a ram's head (fig. 12.11). The demon gives rise to the sun disk, the birth of which is represented above its horns taking several guises as a child, a scarab, and as a disk. The association of the ram's head with the sun disk cannot be a coincidence in both the religions of Crete and Egypt; we can best explain it by applying Egyptian solar ideas to the Minoan visual vocabulary.

Indeed, a lot more becomes understandable in this fashion. We may better understand why two lions, or possibly dogs, flank and guard the sun disk on a seal from Knossos (*Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel* II 8, 326); the composition mirrors the Egyptian lions that guard the akhet in Egyptian art.

Consider also the Minoan hybrid creature commonly known as "the Minoan genius" in Minoan iconography. It is clearly inspired by the Egyptian goddess Taweret and was introduced in this form to Crete already during the First Palace period, at about the time of the Twelfth Dynasty. At first, this Cretan demon had an Egyptian form but later it changed, as the work of Judith Weingarten has shown. During the era of the New Palaces, corresponding to the early Eighteenth Dynasty, it becomes transformed into a lion, and greater emphasis is placed on his (or her) predatorial aspect. Still, Egyptian ideas linger behind the imagery. And yet, there is also convergence of ideas during the Eighteenth Dynasty. A striking example is Taweret as Isis or *rrt* on the ceilings of Theban tombs (Tharwas [TT 232], Senenmut [TT 71], and Sety I [KV 17]).

Her role there is to control the Sethian foreleg of a bull, the constellation of the Big Dipper. The foreleg of Seth in the northern sky is tied by a chain to two mooring posts of flint, and Taweret/Isis holds the chain, ensuring that the universe remains in good order. The imagery persists into Ptolemaic times (fig. 12.12a). We find precisely the same astral context of the Minoan genius on a seal from Knossos contemporary to the Eighteenth Dynasty (fig. 12.12b). He is carrying a convoluted deer on his shoulders, a form that may be a reference to a constellation because its contorted position is artificial. Be that as it may, the

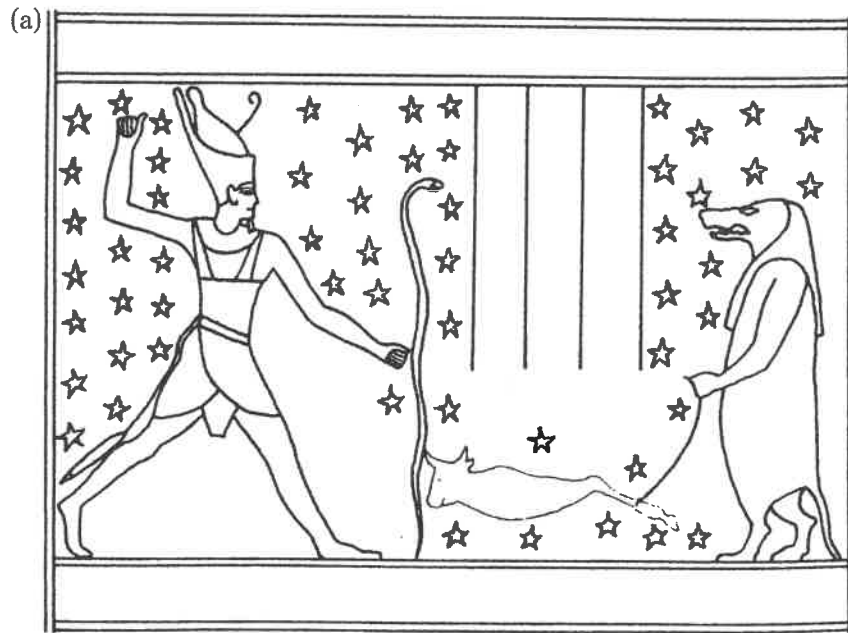


FIGURE 12.12a Taweret controlling the leg of Seth. Ceiling of the temple of Isis at Philae; Ptolemaic Period.



FIGURE 12.12b Minoan seal now in Berlin.

important point is that the genius is depicted among the stars and is therefore certainly a reference to the nocturnal sky.

A further insight into Egypto-Minoan relations has been brought about by the excavations of Manfred Bietak at Tell el-Dab'a in the Egyptian Nile Delta, where a palace of the time of Thutmose III or Hatshepsut has been brought to light. The big surprise of this excavation was that parts of the palace were decorated with Minoan murals. Skepticism regarding the style of the frescoes as products of local or Levantine artists has been expressed but is not justified: their technique (string impressions on the still wet plaster, for example) and the semantic value of their motifs (such as a Minoan seal worn around the wrist of a bull-grappler) betray the genuinely Minoan pedigree of the painters. Some of the fragments depict processions, acrobats within a palm grove, bull-leaping, and predatory chase (leopards and lions hunting bulls and deer). But there is also a purely Minoan symbol among the murals that merits our attention because it reveals how a religious motif was internationally recognizable. I am referring to a frieze of half rosettes painted below the bull-leaping and -grappling scene at Tell el-Dab'a. Some viewers may have known that the frieze of half rosettes replicated the stone frieze of the west façade of the palace of Knossos; others may have recognized that the rosette is not unique to Knossos but an international emblem shared by Egyptian, Anatolian, and Syrian iconography. Here is one example from Egypt: a rosette, representing the sun, is shown between the horns of a Hathor cow head in a ceiling painting of Amenhotep III at Malkata. Thus, the half-rosette frieze of the Tell el-Dab'a taureador painting illustrates the commonality of symbols and supports the hypothesis that the palaces played a vital role in the dissemination of religious ideas.

Conclusion: The Impact of Egyptian Solar Theology on Minoan Crete

Egyptian pictograms and ideograms are of great importance for a new appreciation of Minoan religious concepts. It has been argued here, first, that the transmission happened on the level of literate elites and the palace and not on the popular level; second, that the affinities between Minoan and Egyptian religion were based on concepts of solar mythology and imagery. The ankh, the akhet (twin mountain of the horizon), the ox head bearing the solar disk or double ax, the ram's head, the twin lions or dogs as guardians of the sun disk, the Minoan genius/Taweret, and the Minoan half rosette have been considered as part of this vocabulary. Most of these signs appear in Minoan Crete already during the era of the First Palaces, some taking the form of hieroglyphs.

For lack of space, the rest of the Minoan motifs with obvious Egyptian origins will receive only a short mention. The list is nevertheless impressive: griffin, cat,

monkey, cow and calf, palm, papyrus, reeds, rosette, wadj plant. Interestingly enough all these motifs have some connection with solar religion.

The same phenomenon, the spread of Egyptian solar cult, is attested in Syria on seals dating to the period of the Twelfth Dynasty (corresponding to the Middle Bronze Age in Syria). They attest to a rich visual vocabulary of Egyptianizing religious motifs, and the list is long: winged sun disk, rosette, ankh, Hathor- or Isis-type goddess, Horus-type falcon god, lions, griffins, sphinxes, palm trees topped with rosette. Also demonic creatures, similar to Bes or Taweret, make their appearance at that time. Is it a coincidence that the aforementioned motifs penetrate Crete at about the same time? Or is it rather the case that Egyptian influences were disseminated from one royal house to the next especially during the Twelfth Dynasty? In any case the religious influence of Egypt in the entire region cannot be doubted.