



# THE ENIGMA OF THE HYKSOS

**ERC Advanced Grant (ERC ADG Project 668640)**

**At the Austrian Archaeological Institute at the Austrian Academy of Sciences**



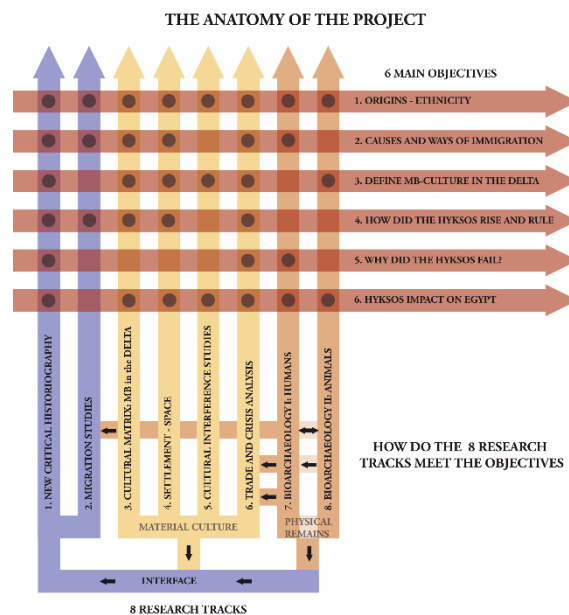
The aim of the project (2016–2021), under the direction of Manfred Bietak, was to determine the origin of the so-called Hyksos kings, a dynasty of foreign rulers being in power in Egypt in the so-called Second Intermediate Period. We would like to thank the European Research Council (ERC) – Horizon 2020 Programme, The Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Austrian Archaeological Institute as hosts. For special support we are indebted to Mr. Olivier Fuchs/Frankfort.

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The Hyksos (Greek rendering of the Egyptian title ‘rulers of the foreign countries’) were a dynasty of foreign monarchs being in power in Egypt between c. 1640 and 1530 BCE. Some modern researchers, following the ancient historian Flavius Josephus (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD), thought them to be ancestors of the early Israelites. Others suggested that their appearance has to be tied to the expansion of the Hurrian people into the Levant, starting at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Nowadays those opinions are largely rejected. Most scholars dealing with the subject today believe, according to the existing onomastic data, that they were western Semites. Their exact geographical origin in the Levant, the process of their seizure of power in Egypt and their specific role in history remained, however, an enigma, as the period is poorly represented in texts. Nevertheless, the Hyksos phenomenon has thus far mainly been studied by text-based Egyptology, ignoring other possible sources, like archaeological remains, burial customs, settlement patterns, not to mention biological data.

In the last decades excavations at several places in Egypt’s eastern Delta have produced an enormous wealth of new information and it is possible now, together with finds stored in several museums all over the world, to resort to enormous quantities of objects reflecting the material culture as well as physical remains, which can be attributed to the carriers of Hyksos rule and their predecessors. These materials available were so far largely left aside in the scientific discussion, but can be utilised as first class historical sources. The investigations of this innovative project were conducted in eight interrelated research tracks (RTs), incorporating an array of archaeological, historical, theoretical and analytical approaches. Archaeological analyses, cultural interference studies and new onomastic studies played an equal role as well as most up-to-date DNA and Sr isotope analyses (bio-

archaeological research by the second host institution, the Bournemouth University – UK) as well as gas-phase chromatography.



An impact of foreign settlers can already be traced in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty through the import of technologies previously unknown in Egypt. For example: the introduction of artificial irrigation by means of the *shadûf*, the introduction of the fast-turning potter's wheel, and the introduction of a new weighing system, which at that time was used side-by-side with the Egyptian weighing system. The innovation of a new weight system can be compared to the introduction of an international monetary system (a modern example would be the US Dollar) and shows the dependence and interconnectivity of the newcomers with the Near Eastern sphere, where this weight system was in use already in the Early Bronze Age. Also of note is the introduction of new metallurgical technologies, for instance, the use of bivalve moulds of steatite, which enabled the production of sophisticated forms of weaponry like veined daggers, duckbill and shaft-hole axes, the scimitar, socketed spear heads, and fine jewellery. It appears more and more likely that the military equipment of the New Kingdom, including, of course, the use of the horse-drawn chariot and the training and upkeep of horses, depended on the expertise of foreigners originating from the Near East. Their expertise in highly specialised occupations was certainly the reason that the people behind Hyksos rule were not expelled by the victorious 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty as some evidence from the Eastern Delta (such as the continuity in the pottery production), suggests, but were employed, according to their skills, by the new overlords of the country. Evidence of Canaanite religion, especially the influence of the Syrian storm god on the character of the Egyptian storm god Seth, and evidence of Near Eastern religious concepts, and their acceptance in Egyptian religion and literature in the New Kingdom, can also be traced.

With the founding of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the start of the regionalisation of Ancient Egypt was launched in the eastern Delta. Near Eastern palaces and Near Eastern Temples (with their nearest parallels in northernmost Syria and northern Mesopotamia) indicate that among the elite, the decision makers in Avaris, were people who acquired their cultural background in northernmost Syria and northern

Mesopotamia, which fits with the introduction of the artificial irrigation techniques mentioned above. The investigation of burial customs, material culture and religious architecture points to an origin for (at least a part of) the decision makers in Tell el-Dab'a in northern Syria. The Hurrians too, could have constituted (theoretically) some part of the Hyksos elite. On the other hand, the office of a 'Ruler of Retjenu' established at Avaris, included names identical or very similar to the princes of Byblos, which shows a close relationship between the two cities. Close ties between Sidon and Tell el-Dab'a appear to reveal commercial connections, the transmission of ideas and of specific cult concepts. Evidence garnered from Sidon and Tell el-Dab'a seems to suggest, according to the affinities of material culture, and religious and funerary customs, that the region of southern Lebanon may have been the former homeland, or at least an intermediate stopover for the people who finally settled in Avaris.

The conflagration of the palace of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dynasty shows that the change to the 15<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the Hyksos, did not happen peacefully. Many changes happened at that time ( $\pm 1640$  BCE) in Avaris. Significant changes are recognisable in the ceramic corpus. A new temple of Egyptian style was built. The town grew from 100 to 250 ha. There must have been an enormous demographic influx of people of Asiatic descent, but from within Egypt. They came most likely from the Memphitic area where Asiatic settlements of the late Middle Kingdom are attested in papyri but can be also verified archaeologically at Lisht. These new settlers seemed to have toppled first the 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and moved afterwards to take over Avaris. The major question is, if these new settlers who caused the Hyksos rule had the same genes as the inhabitants of Avaris during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Dynasties or if they have absorbed descendants of previous settlers from the Levant.

The Hyksos Enigma Project, with its eight interrelating research tracks, has attempted to recreate, in holistic interpretations, the rise of the Hyksos in the 15<sup>th</sup> dynasty and of their predecessors by engaging in current theoretical and methodological thinking modes. The analysis of skeletal remains from Tell el-Dab'a, compared to osteological series from other sites in the Levant, offers another avenue of evidence in the discussion of the nature and impact of the Hyksos. It is a multidisciplinary approach, combining non-destructive macroscopic (dental nonmetric and palaeopathological traits) and biochemical (stable isotopes and ancient DNA) analyses together with the full scope of the archaeological record. Thus it becomes possible to construct, to some extent, the population's history and individual life stories. The stable isotope analysis of 75 individuals from Tell el-Dab'a showed that over half of all individuals (53%) spent their childhood outside the Nile Delta. Of those individuals for whom sex estimation was possible, 78% of females and 50% of males displayed  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  values outside the local values. The wide range of values suggests that non-locals, before or during Hyksos rule, did not come from a unified homeland, but an extensive variety of geographic origins. This is interesting, as the population interred at Tell el-Dab'a appears to represent a multicultural hub throughout the site's occupation. This is shown by the results of the Dental Nonmetric Traits that exhibited little change in the biological affinities of the Tell el-Dab'a population from the end of Middle Kingdom throughout the Second Intermediate Period. The analysis of the Tell el-Dab'a series, compared with other sites in the Levant, suggests a strong biological affinity with contemporary Levantine populations and is distinctly different from contemporary Egyptian osteological remains. Palaeopathological examinations along the chronological contexts of the site show no changes between the Hyksos and the pre-Hyksos period, showing that the population might have been diverse but stable in itself.

One thing for certain – the Hyksos played a much greater role in the history of the Old World than envisaged so far. They pushed Egypt back into focus of the events in the Near East in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE.

For further information please refer to: <http://thehyksosenigma.oeaw.ac.at/>

## Publications

## Already published monographs and anthologies

M. Bietak & S. Prell (eds.), *The Enigma of the Hyksos Volume I. ASOR Conference Boston 2017 – ICAANE Conference Munich 2018 – Collected Papers*, Contributions to the Archaeology of Egypt, Nubia and the Levant 9, Wiesbaden 2019.

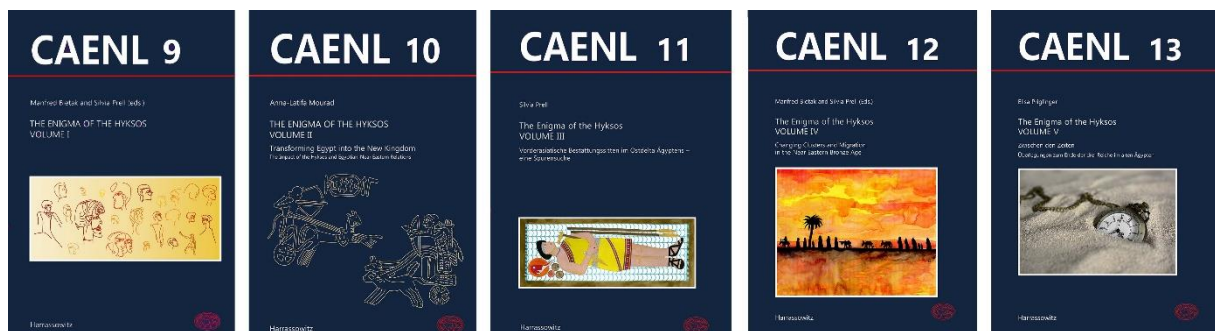
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*(Four more volumes are in preparation)*



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*(This list comprises only articles relevant to the ERC Advanced Grant Project 'The Enigma of the Hyksos', many more articles are in press and in preparation).*

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