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REVIEW

Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt: Perceptions and Reality

by Phyllis Saretta
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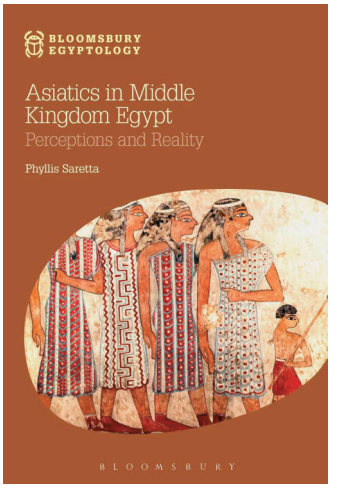
Reviewed by Nicholas Picardo,
Harvard University, the Giza Project



With *Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt: Perceptions and Reality*, Phyllis Saretta assumes the difficult task of bringing new perspective to pivotal times that preceded the dramatic manifestation of the Hyksos in Egypt that defines the Second Intermediate Period. She does so essentially by isolating them from the topic of the Hyksos altogether. With the introductory first chapter, she outlines the aim of her study: to track Egyptian attitudes towards the people(s) whom the ancient Egyptians called *ʿꜣmw*. Saretta wishes to move beyond what she regards as the prevailing trend of past analyses, namely the prioritization of political (thus official, royal) ideology as the overwhelmingly influential force that shaped Egyptian perceptions of Asiatics. She proposes instead a diachronic, integrative approach that ascribes equal weight to multiple evidentiary lines. The chosen methodology is sound, in that a broadly inclusive view has less often been the rule for assessing predecessors of the Hyksos in Egypt than for the Hyksos themselves. This study culls the surviving record to describe circumstances and conditions that might explain the origins and influences on Egyptian perceptions of Asiatics, along with how they evolved from the Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom. Art, literature, historical texts, archaeological material, and comparative linguistics are brought together to be gauged cumulatively, not only from within Egypt but from across the Sinai and farther afield into the broader ancient Near East and Anatolia. Saretta draws upon varied sources from far and wide to flesh out her arguments by finding possible connections, associations, and affinities in the material record. So many individual pieces of evidence are brought into play and compared that it would be impossible to evaluate each on its own merits in a short review. So, the approach here will be summary, first teasing out the most salient elements of individual chapters before providing some overall commen-tary.

Chapter 2, the first topical chapter, embarks on a seemingly straightforward etymological investigation of the word *ʿꜣmw*, a not-so-straightforward Egyptian term. Saretta's guiding premise is that it is an Amorite loan word, such that *ʿꜣmw* refers to Canaanite West Semitic peoples, or more specifically Amorites (depending primarily upon chronological period and context in which it appears). Saretta advocates for narrowing the broad cultural designation encompassed by traditional translations of *ʿꜣmw* simply as "Asiatics." Instead, she argues that this designation refers to Amorites, i.e. as the direct correlates in Egypt of those peoples named as *MAR.TU* and *Amurru* in Akkadian and Sumerian cuneiform texts of Mesopotamia. Indeed, much of this book functions to highlight cultural attributes particular to Amorites—i.e. West Semitic Asiatics most associated with coastal Lebanon, northern Syria, and northwestern Mesopotamia—as the group(s) of reference in ancient Egyptian sources of Old through Middle Kingdom dates.[1] One chapter section reviews a small list of other associated Egyptian terms, from which there is one especially notable standout. Saretta distinguishes between *ʿꜣmw* as "Amorites/West Semitic Asiatics" and *Styw* as "non-sedentary Asiatics." While *ʿꜣmw* is an ethnic/ cultural appellation, *Styw* is an "attitudinal" term (and a pejorative; see p. 21) applied to a subset of the former based on facets

of their lifestyle.

Chapter 3 surveys the Egyptian artistic record as a complement to textual references, with a focus on visual representations that align with stereotypes of Asiatics that appear in texts, including those discussed in the preceding chapter. After a very selective review of traditional iconographic tropes (bound, captive foreigners and royal smiting scenes) as emblematic expressions of prevailing state ideology regarding foreigners, Saretta consults the visual record to detect changes in depictions of Asiatics from the Old to the Middle Kingdom that veer from this negative attitude. Saretta acknowledges an incongruence that complicates such a diachronic comparison, in that specific identification of Asiatic peoples is seldom clear for Old Kingdom representations, while Middle Kingdom appearances are more frequently marked in one way or another. It is only as of the earliest years of the Middle Kingdom that the designator *ʿꜣmw* and visual depictions of "West Semites/Amorites" coincide to close this gap somewhat. However, the insinuation in this presentation is that, whether in scenes of conflict or commerce, combinations of physical features and fashion are hallmarks of this population in the Old Kingdom: kilted men with a full beard, long (straight or wavy) hair tied with a fillet and falling around shoulder-length; and associated women wearing nearly ankle-length dresses that flare a little at the bottoms. Also stressed in this chapter—and as a recurrent theme throughout the book—is the separation and limited contact/exposure between most Egyptians and Western Semitic groups during this era. Consistent with this perspective, new details that first appear in art of Dynasty 12 of Egypt's Middle Kingdom are considered to be "more accurate and detailed" in both royal and non-royal contexts, primarily because this was a period of expanded interaction between Egyptian and Canaanite spheres, and thus increased exposure of Egyptians to more and more people of Western Semitic origins.

A sizeable portion of this chapter concentrates on tombs scenes at the Middle Egyptian site of Beni Hasan, including Tombs 15 (Baqt III) and 17 (Khety) but especially Tombs 2–3 (Amenemhat; Khnumhotep II) and 14 (Khnumhotep I), as a spectrum of depictions that undergo changes from the First Intermediate Period through the Middle Kingdom at a single Egyptian site.[2] The analysis culminates in a detailed exposition of the most famous scene of *ʿꜣmw* in Egyptian art, the "caravan scene" from the tomb of Khnumhotep II (Tomb 3). As is essential for this book's topic, much attention is devoted to this scene, which Saretta understands as "an index to determining a Middle Bronze IIA West Semitic lifestyle" (p. 107). The scene depicts the provincial governor and potentate Khnumhotep II receiving a file of fifteen (quantified by inscription as thirty-seven) Asiatics, including women and children, with animals (donkeys, ibex, gazelle) and goods presumably from their homeland, led by their chief (Egyptian *ḥḳꜥ ḫꜣst*, "Ruler of a Foreign Land").[3] Saretta breaks down the scene's composition by singling out attributes; attire; objects; and behaviors for which she can cite potential Near Eastern comparanda and/or textual counterparts. These include: brightly-colored, elaborately-patterned, off-the-shoulder garments (likely wool); sandals; "mushroom-shaped" hairstyles; a lyre; water skins; bellows; a duckbill axe; use of donkeys for transport; and an association with desert animals. Consistent with the major thesis of the book, northern Syria is among the most-referenced regional affiliations of the comparative source material. Saretta concludes, however, that the foreign entourage in the Khnumhotep II scene are "fringe Amorites" with "roots in that segment of Amorite culture that is sedentary, but is moved about by the segment of the *ʿꜣmw* that are nomads" (pp. 107–108). However, there is no clarification of why the scene labels this group as *ʿꜣmw* as opposed to *Styw*, per Saretta's breakdown of terminology in Chapter 1. Perhaps there is additional nuance yet to be discerned.

With Chapter 3 having tracked the trajectory of Egyptian views towards some Asiatics from antagonistic to more practical and amiable, the following chapter looks into "West Semites and the Economic Life of Egypt." Chapter 4 aims to establish that *ʿꜣmw*-Asiatics of Middle Kingdom Egypt—whether free or in servitude—were known, appreciated, and sometimes employed for the same skills as in their native regions. She emphasizes that texts and scenes indicate they sometimes worked alongside Egyptians, in some cases enjoying high regard for their specializations. This chapter profiles these careers in the Egyptian sources, juxtaposing them with references in other ancient Near Eastern sources, to map a broad landscape across which *ʿꜣmw*-Asiatics had reputations for certain trades which might have followed them to Egypt. Saretta surveys the limited Egyptian evidence that men may have held careers associated with cattle herding, breeding, and/or management. At the Sinai mining site of Serabit el-Khadim, although "their function within the expedition to the Sinai cannot be positively ascertained" (p. 129), at least some men were most likely employed as artisans, probably coppersmiths. If the author's reinterpretation of the Egyptian term *ỉmnw* holds true, they were present in sufficient numbers to constitute "guilds" (pp. 131–135). Saretta projects from this scenario to posit similar, though less visible, presence of Asiatic artisans in the Middle Kingdom capital region, specifically at Lisht and Dashur. In other sections of the book, attention to Asiatic mercenaries adds one more activity to this list. *ʿꜣmw* women may have worked in Egypt as weavers. Although the treatment of this topic essentially describes virtual exclusivity of Asiatics in production of dyed wool in Egypt, concluding thoughts fortunately leave open the possibility that "commerce rather than local production affords a simple solution" for this association (p. 121). Syro-Mesopotamian references provide a backdrop also for considering roles for *ʿꜣmw* women in Egypt as midwives, specialized attendants for Egyptian women, and in ceremonial service as offering bearers or dancers.

Together, a number of the cross-cultural comparisons of

Chapter 4 comprise an exploration of hairstyles, which play prominent roles as ethno-cultural identifiers of Asiatics/Amorites in Egyptian contexts as well as abroad. The directness of this presentation foregoes excursions into the complexities of comparing such targeted iconographic details across two-dimensional and three-dimensional artistic genres, including such stylized forms as glyptic representations on seals. It is, of course, difficult to substantiate cases of assimilated foreigners if/when their depictions are identical to native Egyptians, and Saretta proposes reasons for interpreting beyond the face-value of such Egyptianized portrayals. Sometimes she may ask a little much, however. For instance, female weavers who appear in scenes of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan "appear as Egyptian in every way," yet "perhaps some of them are actually Asiatics. There is no inscription to confirm this deduction, but inference can be made that they were so fully assimilated into this community, they were considered 'residents,' and were not differentiated as foreigners" (pp. 115–116). That a similar convention might appear in the much later New Kingdom tomb of Rekhmire—but notably, accompanied by textual confirmation of non-Egyptian origins of the figures—does little to justify this interpretive leap for the Middle Kingdom scene in the absence of indications that the later scene might have used the former as a template or reference.

Among the concluding thoughts of Chapter 5, Saretta assesses that "the various chapters of this book may be seen as an extended commentary of a sort on the painting in the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan, which encapsulates so many aspects of the West Semitic-Egyptian relations in the Middle Kingdom" (p. 189). The author may sell her work a little short with this evaluation, even if, as she continues, "the scene of the Asiatic *ʿɜmw*, Abishai and his 'caravan,' may serve as a concrete embodiment to the points brought out in this study." True enough; however, for readers with a stake in the subject matter, the most interesting food for thought is served up in Saretta's interpretative interweaving of disparate strands of data from multiple cultural zones. These are not confined to this single Middle Kingdom tomb scene; rather, they permeate the book.

Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt is an updated and augmented reworking of the author's doctoral dissertation (NYU, 1997). As revised, it bears some resemblances to a scholarly monograph, a popular book, and a doctoral thesis. Possibly as a result of this mixed-genre quality, aspects of organization, writing style, and phrasing do not always do favors for the reader. In general the book would have benefitted from further smoothing of language, sifting of some unnecessary redundancies, and tighter (copy) editing. Such writing quirks sometimes lead to a staccato disjointedness in the flow of ideas that may hinder a full appreciation. With so much evidence object- and art-based, the ample inclusion of black and white images and illustrations is both essential and appreciated. For these Saretta draws heavily upon the collections and archives of the Metropolitan Museum. Undoubtedly this is a study that will speak most cogently to scholars and advanced student specialists, for whom it is likely intended. Throughout, artifacts, cultural contexts, texts of many languages/scripts, and historical settings are introduced often as though readers arrive with some familiarity. The extent of introductory details in any one section is variable, ranging from rudimentary to thorough. Whether or not this observation constitutes a criticism will depend upon each reader's own background. (Either way, it behooves one to consult all endnotes.) A reader's capacity to situate evidence in time and place is an important factor for using this volume effectively, more so because one major hypothesis of the study is that changes in various socio-economic milieus were the catalysts that created key opportunities, first for contact and exchange, then also for immigration, changing attitudes, and assimilation.

This is a title that promises neither to thoroughly chronicle the intellectual history concerning Asiatics in Egypt nor to compose another preface to the Hyksos presence in Egypt.[4] It is a study that, above all else, *explores possibilities*. In this regard, Saretta's approach sometimes feels refreshingly unrestricted in its willingness to simply draw lines—all there to be drawn—and then flesh out the *potential* interpretive value of the materials and concepts they connect across time, geography, and gradually intersecting socio-cultural spheres. At other turns, though, some comparisons strike one as more intuitive—even approaching free association—than rigorously academic (in Chapter 4, particularly). Such a wide spectrum of reasoning occasionally makes it difficult to gauge whether an idea is advanced as a casual musing or instead is intentionally provocative, such as: "With the movement of peoples, through trade, employment and/or military expeditions, both Egypt and the Near East were open to foreign influences; it is not known whether some of the changes in material culture, or the innovation of realism in the portraits of Senwosret III, were due to closer contact with Western Asia" (p. 139). Nonetheless, *Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt* indeed promotes thought, which is among the most desirable outcomes of a scholarly work. In fact, this read will challenge many to define for themselves their own analytical threshold between causation and correlation—asking just how many degrees of separation between one data point and others satisfy their own standards of proof, and, correspondingly, how many degrees overshoot an acceptable mark.

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1 Per the chronological tables included on pp. 285–291, the Egyptian Old Kingdom dates from 2649–2150 BC, while the Middle Kingdom spans 2040–1640 BC.

2 The chronological tables of pp. 285–291 list the First Intermediate Period as 2150–2040 BC.

3 The section heading of "*ʾIb Šɜ*, the Amorite sheikh" probably does not strike the right note for this figure.

[4] This being said, *Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt* still will be most useful alongside studies that address the background of the Hyksos, such as (but not limited to): Anna-Latifa Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early Second Intermediate Period*, Archaeopress Egyptology 11 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015); Manfred Bietak, "From Where Came the Hyksos and Where Did They Go?" in Marcel Marée (ed.), *The Second Intermediate Period (Thirteenth–Seventeenth Dynasties): Current Research, Future Prospects* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 139-181; Eliezer D. Oren (ed.), *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1997).