

BOOK REVIEW

Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt: Perceptions and Reality. By PHYLLIS SARETTA. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. xiv + 314. Hardcover, \$120.00. ISBN 978-1-4742-2623-3.

Until the middle of the 20th century CE, the field of study into the attitude of Egyptians towards West Semites¹ (in Egyptian sources the *Amu/ḥammu*) and/or the position of West Semites in Egyptian society—especially during the Middle Kingdom—was rather underdeveloped. Naturally, there were contributions, sometimes important contributions, to our knowledge, all holding very diverging views on the position of foreigners in general and West Semites in particular in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom and subsequent Second Intermediate Period.² Advancing research, especially during the past five decades,³ demanded a new comprehensive review of the current notions regarding the position of West Semites in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom. Saretta has accepted that challenge and—admittedly—presents an altogether admirable book.

In the Introduction (1–10), Saretta briefly outlines the scope and methodology of her work and presents a review of previous studies. In my view, both the methodology and the review of previous studies here should have been somewhat

¹ Though the title refers to the subject as “Asiatics”, Saretta herself generally refers to them as “West Semites” or, more specifically, “West Semitic Asiatics”: cf., e.g., pages 1–2, explained on page 11.

² Such contributions include works like Säve-Söderbergh, T., “The Hyksos Rule in Egypt,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 37 (1951) 53–71; Van Seters, J., *The Hyksos. A New Investigation*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1967); and especially Helck, W., *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (1971²) (this list is not at all limitative!). I found it slightly remarkable that the first two of these ‘contributions’ to the discussion of ‘Asiatics’ in Egypt in this period are not included in Saretta’s bibliography.

³ Such research, inter alia, includes: Schneider, Th., *Ausländer in Ägypten während des Mittleren Reiches und der Hyksoszeit*, 2 vols., Wiesbaden: 1998; Mourad, A.-L., *Rise of the Hyksos. Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early Second Intermediate Period*, Oxford: 2015; and notably the excavations directed by Manfred Bietak at Tell el-Dab‘a from the 1980s onward.

longer (notably regarding recent scholarship, that remains by and large out of focus), especially in view of the (frequently new and ground-breaking) insights presented by Saretta in the subsequent chapters. Chapter two (11–42) already is important in that respect, presenting etymology, usage, and synonyms of the word *Amu/hammu* (ʿ3mw)—basically a West Semitic loanword in Egyptian, deriving from an Amorite dialect (11, 17), rather than a native Egyptian word. Simultaneously, the use of the word also presents the geographical—and thereby cultural and historical—background of these immigrants and their descendants: a *discussion* (my emphasis) on their cultural identity is, however, absent, here as well as in chapter three. Frequently connected to ʿ3mw is the Egyptian qualifying adjective *hsy* “wretched”, “miserable”, and “defeated”, “significant for gauging Egyptian perceptions of West Semites” (13, also see 17–18): I might, cautiously, add “recorded Egyptian perceptions”. As we always have to do, we have here as well to consider that “recorded” views or stereotypes do not *necessarily* (my emphasis) reflect “everyday” ones. Nevertheless, I find Saretta’s analyses (also those of other designations: 19–21) of the literary evidence from the Old Kingdom onwards worthwhile and relevant.

Chapter three (43–108) follows up on the analysis of the literary evidence with an extensive review of “West Semites in Egyptian Art of the Old and Middle Kingdoms”, discussing “visual images of West Semites and other Asiatics who are unidentifiable” (43). As Saretta underlines, “pictorial information is a tool of paramount importance in examining the ways in which Egyptians perceived their West Semitic neighbors, ...” (*ibidem*). It is, therefore, only right (though admittedly a bonus) that this chapter benefits from many well chosen and well executed photographs and drawings. Nevertheless, also in this chapter literary evidence is discussed, notably to underline specific aspects of the visual image, e.g. as regards the colour of the red hair of an Asiatic foreigner (73–79).

Chapter four (109–188) discusses ‘West Semites and the Economic Life of Egypt’, examining “sites where West Semites lived and worked” (109). It is an attempt “to synthesize the data from <the> various studies” (*ibidem*). Because new material evidence emerges still frequently, both from the Egyptian sands as well as from sites in the Delta, such a synthesis as attempted in this chapter might seem futile but is nonetheless of the utmost importance, if only to insert a today’s ‘status of knowledge’ (though regrettably from some years ago) on this issue. It is a pleasing bonus that also in this chapter Saretta combines literary (both from Egypt and the Ancient Near East) and pictorial evidence.

To my regret Saretta has paid very little attention to material evidence gathered at Tell el-Dab'a or other sites in the Delta, though in itself perhaps understandable and justifiable because, as she underlines in Chapter 5 ('Conclusion and Prospects for Further Study': 189-200), "[t]he main focus of this book has centered on the early second millennium BCE, ..." (189). As it is, however, somewhat more focus on the whole of the Middle Kingdom as well as evidence acquired from the excavations at Tell el-Dab'a might have yielded more results than now achieved (though it might have added many more pages to the book).

Saretta seldom wanders off the beaten track. The account is straightforward, notably based upon sound textual and art historical evidence, not only of Egyptological nature but also using material from Canaan, Syria, and other related areas. As such, the volume therefore is a tremendous asset, combining a lot of research and (sometimes new and important) insights in a conveniently sized book, opening new venues for further research, fulfilling all the requirements one might have regarding a quality textbook. Above all it is a book that invites to be (intensively) used.

Nevertheless, I found myself as yet occasionally disappointed, hoping Saretta might have gone one step further and would have tackled the subject somewhat bolder and, perhaps, backed by some more recent literature.⁴ It is, however, difficult to point at a specific example but reflects rather a feeling than an actual deficiency. Perhaps I had hoped, as already indicated, for new approaches based on Bietak's work. What I do find a deficiency is the use of endnotes (203–260) instead of footnotes in this book. Style, contents, and presentation suggest the book is primarily aimed at an academic (not necessarily specialist) audience: for such an audience the intertextuality between footnotes and actual text may be all-important. Whether it has been the publisher's choice or the author's, disconnecting this intertextuality has been a bad service to the user of this study. The bibliography is generally sufficient and up to date (until c. 2000), even though some of the older literature has been left out: it is a legitimate option. The chronological tables are useful but perhaps somewhat redundant for most specialists. The index is rather concise but sufficient.

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⁴ An example how to do so is Pelt, W. Paul van, "Revising Egypto-Nubian Relations in New Kingdom Lower Nubia: From Egyptianization to Cultural Entanglement", *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23:3 (2013), 523-50.

