

Hyksos

group of **mixed Semitic-Asiatics** who settled in northern Egypt during the 18th century BC. In about 1630 they seized power, and **Hyksos** kings ruled Egypt as the **15th dynasty (c. 1630–1521 BC)**. The name **Hyksos** was used by the Egyptian historian **Manetho** (fl. 300 BC), who, according to the **Jewish historian Josephus** (fl. 1st century AD), translated the word as “king-shepherds” or “captive shepherds.” **Josephus** wished to demonstrate the great antiquity of the **Jews** and thus identified the **Hyksos** with the **Hebrews of the Old Testament**. This view is not now supported by most scholars, though it is possible that Hebrews came into Egypt during the **Hyksos** period or that some **Hyksos** were the ancestors of some Hebrews.

“**Hyksos**” was probably an Egyptian term for “**rulers of foreign lands**” (**heqa-khase**), and it almost certainly designated the foreign dynasts rather than a whole nation. Although traditionally **they also formed the 16th dynasty**, those rulers were probably only vassals of the 15th-dynasty kings. They seem to have been connected with the general migratory movements elsewhere in the Middle East at the time. Although most of the **Hyksos** names seem to have been **Semitic**, there may also have been a **Hurrian** element among them.

The **Hyksos** introduced the **horse and chariot**, the **compound bow**, **improved battle axes**, and **advanced fortification techniques** into Egypt. At **Avaris** (modern Tall ad-Dab'a) in the northeastern delta, they built their capital with a fortified camp over the remains of a Middle Kingdom town that they had seized. Excavations since the 1960s have revealed a **Canaanite-style temple**, **Palestinian-type burials, including horse burials**, Palestinian types of pottery, and quantities of their superior weapons.

Their chief deity was the **Egyptian storm and desert god, Seth**, whom they identified with an **Asiatic storm god**. From **Avaris** they ruled **most of Lower Egypt** and **Upper Egypt** up to **Hermopolis directly**. South to Cusae, and briefly even beyond, they ruled through **Egyptian vassals**. When under **Seqenenre** and **Kamose** the Thebans began to rebel, the Hyksos pharaoh **Auserre Apopi I** tried unsuccessfully to make an alliance with the rulers of **Cush** who had overrun Egyptian **Nubia** in the later years of the 13th dynasty (c. 1650 BC).

The **Theban revolt** spread northward under **Kamose**, and in about 1521 **Avaris** fell to his successor, **Ahmose**, founder of the 18th dynasty, thereby ending **108 years of Hyksos rule** over Egypt. **Although vilified by the Egyptians starting with Hatshepsut**, the **Hyksos** had ruled as pharaohs and were listed as legitimate kings in the **Turin Papyrus**. At least superficially **they were Egyptianized**, and they **did not interfere** with Egyptian culture beyond the political sphere.

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Encyclopedia Britannica 2005: Hyksos from Phoenicia History

In the 18th century BC new invaders, called **Hyksos**, destroyed the **Amorite** rule in **Byblos** and, passing on to **Egypt**, brought the **Middle Kingdom** to an end (**c. 1720 BC**). Little is known about the **Hyksos'** origin, but they seem to have been ethnically mixed, including a considerable Semitic element, since the **Phoenician deities El, Baal, and Anath** figured in their pantheon. The rule of the **Hyksos** in **Egypt** was brief and their cultural achievement slight, but in this period the links with **Phoenicia** and **Syria** were strengthened by the presence of **Hyksos** aristocracies throughout the region.

Egypt , ancient

The Second Intermediate Period

The increasing competition for power in Egypt and Nubia crystallized in the formation of two new dynasties : the 15th , called the [Hyksos](#) (c. 1630–c. 1523 BC), with its capital at Avaris (Tall ad-Dab'a) in the Delta , and the 17th (c. 1630–1540 BC), ruling from Thebes . The word Hyksos goes back to an Egyptian phrase meaning “ruler of foreign lands” and occurs in Manetho 's narrative cited in the works of the Jewish historian Josephus (1st century AD), which depicts the new rulers as sacrilegious invaders who despoiled the land. They may have invaded , but they presented themselves—with the exception of the title Hyksos—as Egyptian kings and appear to have been accepted as such. The main line of Hyksos was acknowledged throughout Egypt and may have been recognized as overlords in Palestine , but they tolerated other lines of kings, both those of the 17th dynasty and the various minor Hyksos who are termed the 16th dynasty. The 17th dynasty therefore had to accept that it was a junior line , and in this distinction of status lay an occasion , if not a cause, of later conflict. The 15th dynasty consisted of six kings, the best known being the fifth, [Apopis](#), who reigned for up to 40 years. There were many 17th-dynasty kings, probably belonging to several different families. The northern frontier of the Theban domain was at al-Qusiyya, but there was trade across the border and the Thebans pastured their herds in the Delta .

Asiatic rule brought many technical innovations to Egypt, as well as cultural innovations such as new musical instruments and musical styles. The changes affected techniques from bronze working and pottery to looms ; and new breeds of animals and new crops were introduced . In warfare, composite bows, new types of daggers and scimitars , and above all the horse and chariot transformed previous practice , although the chariot may ultimately have been as important as a prestige vehicle as for tactical advantages it conferred . The effect of these changes was to bring Egypt, which had been technologically backward, onto the level of western Asia. Because of these advances and the perspectives it opened up, Hyksos rule was decisive for Egypt's later empire in the Near East.

Whereas the 13th dynasty was fairly prosperous , the Second Intermediate Period may have been impoverished . The regional centre of the cult of Osiris at Abydos, which has produced the largest quantity of Middle Kingdom monuments , lost importance , but sites such as Thebes , Idfū, and Kawm al-Aḥmar have yielded significant , if sometimes crudely worked, remains . Virtually no information has come from the north , where the Hyksos ruled , and it is impossible to assess their impact on the economy or on high culture. The Second Intermediate Period was the consequence of political fragmentation

and immigration and was not associated with the severe economic collapse of the early First Intermediate Period.

Toward the end of the 17th dynasty (c. 1545 BC), the Theban king [Seqenenre](#) challenged Apopis, probably dying in battle against him. Seqenenre's successor, Kamose, renewed the challenge, stating in an inscription that it was intolerable to share his land with an Asiatic and a Nubian (the Karmah ruler). By the end of his third regnal year he had made raids as far south as the Second Cataract (and possibly much farther) and in the north to the neighbourhood of Avaris, also intercepting in the Western Desert a letter sent from Apopis to a new Karmah ruler on his accession. By campaigning to the north and to the south Kamose acted out his implicit claim to the territory ruled by Egypt in the Middle Kingdom. His exploits formed a vital stage in the long struggle to expel the Hyksos.

[John R. Baines](#)



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Feature Story

Who Were the Hyksos?

by Troy Fox

The Hyksos were an important influence on Egyptian history, particularly at the beginning of the [Second Intermediate Period](#). Most of what we know of the nature of the Hyksos depends upon written sources (of the Egyptians), such as the Rhind Papyrus. Also of considerable importance is the systematic excavation of their capital, [Avaris \(Tell el-Dab'a\)](#).



Aamu was the contemporary term used to distinguish the people of Avaris, the Hyksos capital in Egypt, from Egyptians. Egyptologists conventionally translate aamu as "asiatics". The Jewish historian, Josephus, in his *Contra Apionem*, claims that Manetho was the first to use the Greek term, Hyksos, incorrectly translated as "shepherd-kings". Contemporary Egyptians during the Hyksos invasion designated them as hikau khausut, which meant "rulers of foreign countries", a term that originally only referred to the ruling caste of the invaders. However, today the term Hyksos has come to refer to the whole of these people who ruled Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period of Egypt's ancient history, and had to be driven out of the land by the last ruler of the [17th Dynasty](#) and the earliest ruler of Egypt's [New Kingdom](#).

Josephus claims to quote directly from Manetho, who's original history is lost to us, when he describes the conquest and occupation of Egypt by the Hyksos:

"By main force they easily seized it without striking a blow; and having overpowered the rulers of the land, they then burned our cities ruthlessly, razed to the ground the temples of gods...Finally, they appointed as king one of their number whose name was Salitis."

Some of this rings true, while other parts seem not to be. It appears that the Hyksos left much of Egypt alone. It is clear that Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a) was occupied by a people who exhibited specifically non-Egyptian cultural traits. We find this in the layout of the town itself, the houses, and particularly the burials, which were intermixed with the living community, unlike those of the Egyptians. While we know that the Hyksos established

centers, as their influence gradually moved towards [Memphis](#) along the eastern edge of the Delta, at Farasha, Tell el-Sahaba, [Bubastis](#), Inshas and [Tell el-Yahudiyas](#) very little of this particular culture has been found at other Egyptian sites. At the same time, the Hyksos living in Egypt have been described as "Peculiarly Egyptian". They were great builders and artisans. And little seems to have changed between the Egyptian style of [governing](#), and that of the Hyksos. While the Hyksos imported some of their own gods, they also appear to have honored the Egyptian deities as well, such as [Seth](#), who became assimilated with some Hyksos deities. Of course, we must also recall that Egypt already had somewhat of a history with the "Asiatics", including wars and considerable trade, so it would not be surprising to find some mix of cultures even among the Egyptians of the Delta.



The Hyksos were basically a Semitic people who were able to wrestle control of Egypt from the early Second Intermediate rulers of the [13th Dynasty](#), inaugurating the [15th Dynasty](#). Their names mostly come from the West Semitic languages, and earlier suggestions that some of these people were Hurrian or even Hittite have not been confirmed. However, it is not easy to determine their origins within that Asiatic region, and at Tell el-Dab'a, the culture of the people was not static, but rapidly developed new traits and discarded old ones. Yet the reason for, and method of the cultural mixing and rapid development of Asiatics at Tell el-Dab'a remains unclear.

One hypothesis is that the basic population of Egyptians allowed, from time to time, a new influx of settlers, first from the region of Lebanon and Syria, and subsequently from Palestine and Cyprus. The leaders of these people eventually married into the local Egyptian families, a theory that is somewhat supported by preliminary studies of human remains at Tell el-Dab'a. Indeed, parallels for the foreign traits of the Hyksos at Tell el-Dab'a have been found at southern Palestinian sites such as Tell el-Ajjul, at the Syrian site of Ebla and at Byblos in modern Lebanon.

Hence, the Hyksos rule of Egypt was probably the climax of waves of Asiatic immigration and infiltration into the northeastern Delta of the Nile. This process was perhaps aided by the Egyptians themselves. For example, [Amenemhat II](#) records, in unmistakable language, a campaign by sea to the Lebanese coast that resulted in a list of booty comprising 1,554 Asiatics, and considering that Egypt's eastern border was fortified and probably patrolled by soldiers, it is difficult to understand how massive numbers of foreign people could have simply migrated into northern Egypt. These people migrated, or otherwise moved to the region from the [12th Dynasty](#) onward, and by the [13th Dynasty](#), this migration became widespread.

The Hyksos did eventually utilize superior bronze [weapons](#), [chariots](#) and [composite bows](#) to help them take control of Egypt, though



in reality, the relative slowness of their advance southwards from the Delta seems to support the argument that the process was gradual and did not ultimately turn on the



possession of overwhelming military superiority. Hence, by about 1720 BC, they had grown strong enough, at the expense of the [Middle Kingdom](#) kings, to gain control of Avaris in the northeastern Delta. This site eventually became the capital of the Hyksos kings, but within 50 years, they had also managed to take control of the important Egyptian city of Memphis.

Given this slow advance by the Hyksos rulers into southern Egypt, it seems reasonable to infer that the superior military technology of the Hyksos was but an adjunct to their exploitation of the political weakness of the late Middle Kingdom.

However, the Hyksos never really ruled Egypt completely. Their expansion southwards was eventually checked. In fact, at least early on, this may have been the result of a massive plague, for at Tell el-Dab'a we find mass graves with little attention to the burials. Though the ruler of Avaris claimed to be King of Upper and Lower Egypt, we know from a stela dating to the 17th Dynasty king [Kamose](#), that [Hermopolis](#) marked the Avaris' king's theoretical southern boundary, while Cusae, a little further south, was actually the specific boarder point. Yet Southern, or Upper Egypt was reduced to a vassal-dom, probably as a result of the effectiveness, eventually, of the Hyksos military forces, at least until the reign of Kamose. Therefore, we do regard them as the legitimate rulers of the whole country during parts of the Second Intermediate Period, considered a chaotic time which the Hyksos at least partially helped to create in Egypt.

Eventually, the Hyksos tolerance of rival claimants to the land beginning in the [5th Dynasty](#) would spell their expulsion by the end of the 17th Dynasty, beginning with the reign of Kamose. By now, the baleful experience of foreign rule had done much to shatter the traditional Egyptian mindset of superiority in both culture and the security of the Egyptian state in the face of external threats.

Yet, Egypt would eventually benefit considerably from their experience of foreign rule, and it has been suggested that the Hyksos rule of Egypt was far less damaging than later [18th Dynasty](#) records would lead us to believe. It would make Egypt a stronger country, with a much more viable military. Because of Egypt's strength and ability to isolate herself from the outside world, cultural and technological growth was often stagnant. Until the Hyksos invasion, the history of Egypt and Asia were mostly isolated, while afterwards, they would be permanently entwined. The Hyksos brought more than weapons to Egypt. It was due to the Hyksos that the hump backed Zebu cattle made their appearance in Egypt. Also, we find new vegetable and fruit crops that were cultivated, along with improvements in pottery and linen arising from the introduction of improved potter's wheels and the vertical loom.

Perhaps one of the greatest contribution of the Hyksos was the preservation of famous Egyptian documents, both literary and scientific. During the reign of Apophis, the fifth king of the "Great Hyksos," scribes were commissioned to recopy Egyptian texts so they would not be lost. One such text was the [Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus](#). This unique text, dating

from about 3000 BC, gives a clear perspective of the human body as studied by the Egyptians, with details of specific clinical cases, examinations, and prognosis. The Westcar Papyrus preserved the only known version of an ancient Egyptian story that may have otherwise been lost. Other restored documents include the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus, the most important mathematical exposition ever found in Egypt.

But it was the diffusion of innovations with more obvious military applications, such as bronze-working, which went far to compensate for the technological backwardness of Middle Kingdom Egypt, and it was these advantages that eventually allowed the kingdom at [Thebes](#) to gain back control of the Two Lands.

See also:

- [Manetho on the Hyksos](#)

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Manetho on the Hyksos

Manetho, *Aegyptiaca.*, frag. 42, 1.75-79.2

Tutimaetus [0]. In his reign, for what cause I know not, a blast of God smote us; and unexpectedly, from the regions of the East, invaders of obscure race marched in confidence of victory against our land. By main force they easily overpowered the rulers of the land, they then burned our cities ruthlessly, razed to the ground the temples of the gods, and treated all the natives with a cruel hostility, massacring some and leading into slavery the wives and children of others. Finally, they appointed as king one of their number whose name was Salitis. He had his seat at Memphis, levying tribute from Upper and Lower Egypt, and leaving garrisons behind in the most advantageous positions. Above all, he fortified the district to the east, foreseeing that the Assyrians, as they grew stronger, would one day covet and attack his kingdom.

In the Saite [Sethroite] nome he found a city very favorably situated on the east of the Bubastite branch of the Nile, and called Auaris (= Avaris) after an ancient religious tradition. This place he rebuilt and fortified with massive walls, planting there a garrison of as many as 240,000 heavy-armed men to guard his frontier. Here he would come in summertime, partly to serve out rations and pay his troops, partly to train them carefully in manoeuvres and so strike terror into foreign tribes.

Josephus Flavius quoting passages concerning the Hyksos from Manetho's *Aegyptiaca*

Flavius Josephus: *Against Apion*

Book 1, section 73

Under a king of ours named Timaus (Tutimaetus) God became angry with us, I know not how, and there came, after a surprising manner, men of obscure birth from the east, and had the temerity to invade our country, and easily conquered it by force, as we did not do battle against them. After they had subdued our rulers, they burnt down our cities, and destroyed the temples of the gods, and treated the inhabitants most cruelly; killing some and enslaving their wives and their children.

Then they made one of their own king. His name was Salatis [1]; he lived at Memphis, and both the upper and lower regions had to pay tribute to him. He installed garrisons in places that were the most suited for them. His main aim was to make the eastern parts safe, expecting the Assyrians, at the height of their power, to covet his kingdom, and invade it. In the Saite Nome there was a city very proper for this purpose, by the Bubastic arm of the Nile. With regard to a certain theologic notion it was called Avaris. He rebuilt and strengthened this city by surrounding it with walls. and by stationing a large garrison of two hundred and forty thousand armed men there. Salitis came there in the summer, to gather corn in order to pay his soldiers, and to exercise his men, and thus to terrify foreigners.

After a reign of thirteen years, he was followed by one whose name was Beon [2], who ruled for forty-four years. After him reigned Apachnas [3] for thirty-six years and seven months. After him Apophis [4] was king for sixty-one years, followed by Janins for fifty years and one month. After all these Assis reigned during forty-nine years and two months. These six were their first kings. They all along waged war against the Egyptians, and wanted to destroy them to the very roots.

"These people, whom we have called kings before, and shepherds too, and their descendants," as he [5] says, "held Egypt for five hundred and eleven years. Then," he says, "the kings of Thebes and the other parts of Egypt rose against the shepherds, and a long and terrible war was fought between them." He says further, "By a king, named Alisphragmuthosis [6], the shepherds were subdued, and were driven out of the most parts of Egypt and shut up in a place named Avaris, measuring ten thousand acres." Manetho says, "The shepherds had built a wall surrounding this city, which was large and strong, in order to keep all their possessions and plunder in a place of strength.

Tethmosis [7], son of Alisphragmuthosis, attempted to take the city by force and by siege with four hundred and eighty thousand men surrounding it. But he despaired of taking the place by siege, and concluded a treaty with them, that they should leave Egypt, and go, without any harm coming to them, wherever they wished. After the conclusion of the treaty they left with their families and chattels, not fewer than two hundred and forty thousand people, and crossed the desert into Syria. Fearing the Assyrians, who dominated over Asia at that time, they built a city in the country which we now call Judea. It was large enough to contain this great number of men and was called Jerusalem.

Book 1, section 93

I shall quote Manetho again, and what he writes as to the order of the times in this case. He says "After this people or shepherds [8] had left Egypt to go to Jerusalem, Tethmosis [2], who drove them out, was king of Egypt and reigned for twenty five years and four months, and then died; ..."

Book 1, section 227

He [5] writes these words: "Those sent to work in the quarries lived miserably for a long while, and the king was asked to set apart the city Avaris, which the shepherds had left, for their habitation and protection; and he granted them their wish.

According to the ancient mythology, Avaris was Typho's [10] city. But when these men had entered it, and found it suitable for a revolt, they chose a ruler from among the priests of Heliopolis, whose name was Osarsiph [9]. They swore an oath that they would obey him in all things. The first laws he gave them were that they should not worship the Egyptian gods, nor should they abstain from any of the sacred animals that the Egyptians held in the highest esteem, but could kill them, and that they should not ally themselves to any but those that were of their conspiracy.

After making such laws as these, and others contrary to Egyptian customs, he ordered that the many the hands at their service to be employed in building walls around the city and prepare for a war with king Amenophis. He colluded with the other priests, and

those that were polluted as well, and sent ambassadors to those shepherds expelled by Tethmosis to Jerusalem, informing them of his own affairs, and of the state of those others that had been treated so shamefully, and desired that they would come united to his assistance in this war against Egypt. He also promised their return to their ancient city and land of Avaris and plentiful support for their people; that he would protect them and fight for them if need be, and that the land would easily be subdued. The shepherds were delighted with his message, and assembled two hundred thousand men. Shortly they arrived at Avaris.

King Amenophis of Egypt, when he heard of their invasion, was perplexed remembering what Amenophis, the son of Papis, had foretold him. He gathered many Egyptians, and deliberated with their leaders, and sent for their sacred animals, above all those worshipped in the temples, and ordered the priests to hide the images of their gods with the utmost care. He also sent his son Sethos, who was also called Ramses, and only five years old, from his father Rhampses to a friend of his. He continued with three hundred thousand of the most warlike Egyptians against the enemy, who met them. But he did not join battle with them, afraid to be fighting against the gods. He turned back and returned to Memphis, where he took Apis and the other sacred animals which he had sent for, and continued to Kush, together with his whole army and masses of Egyptians.

The king of Ethiopia was under an obligation to him and received him, and took care of the masses that were with him, while the land supplied all that was necessary for the men's sustenance. He gave them cities and villages to live in, that was to be from its beginning during those fatally determined thirteen years. He sent his army to guard the borders of Egypt in order to protect King Amenophis. And this is what happened in Kush."

This is some of what the Egyptians tell about the Jews, I omit much for brevity's sake. Manetho continues:

"Later Amenophis returned from Kush with a great army, his son Ahampses led another army, and both of them joined battle with the shepherds and the polluted people, and conquered them, and killed a great many of them, and pursued them to the borders of Syria."

These and more accounts like them are written by Manetho.

Notes:

[0] Tutimaeus: Also Tutimaios, Timaios, perhaps Dedumos? There were two kings of this name during the Second Intermediate Period, Djedneferre and Djedhetepre, variously assigned to either the 13th or the 16th dynasty. Many historians reject the suggestion that Tutimaeus is identical with Dedumos.

[1] Salatis: Salitis, possibly Sheshi

[2] Beon: Yakubber?

[3] Apachnas: Khyan

[4] Apophis: Apepi I

[5] He: Manetho

[6] Alisphragmuthosis: Kamose

[7] Tethmosis: Ahmose

[8] An Egyptian term misunderstood by Flavius: This whole nation was styled Hyksos,

that is, Shepherd-kings: for the first syllable Hyk, according to the sacred dialect, denotes a king, as is sos a shepherd; but this according to the ordinary dialect; and of these is compounded Hyksos: but some say that these people were Arabians." Now in another copy it is said that this word does not denote Kings, but, on the contrary, denotes Captive Shepherds, and this on account of the particle Hyk; for that Hyk, with the aspiration, in the Egyptian tongue again denotes Shepherds, and that expressly also; and this to me seems the more probable opinion, and more agreeable to ancient history. Josephus Flavius, Against Apion, 1,73

[9] Moses: It was also reported that the priest, who ordained their polity and their laws, was by birth of Heliopolis, and his name Osarsiph, from Osyris, who was the god of Heliopolis; but that when he was gone over to these people, his name was changed, and he was called Moses.

[10] Typho: Set (Seth)

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