

Cabot Steward

Reaction 4: The Second Intermediate Period

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Summary:

The chapter “The Second Intermediate Period” by Janine Bourriau, part of The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt, explores the fragmentation of Egypt during approximately 1650-1550 BC. This era is marked by the fragmentation of Egypt into competing regions, including the Hyksos rule in the Delta and the Theban dynasty in the south. The Hyksos, often viewed as foreign invaders, established a robust rule in Avaris and introduced Asiatic cultural elements into Egypt. The Theban kings, particularly Kamose and Ahmose, eventually led campaigns to claim Egyptian sovereignty, which culminated in the reunification of Egypt under Ahmose and the start of the New Kingdom.

Bourriau discusses the archaeological discoveries at Tell el-Dab’a, which reveal a blend of Egyptian and Asiatic artifacts and suggest a unique cultural hybridization during Hyksos rule. The chapter outlines how the Hyksos contributed to Egypt through trade control, technological exchanges, and integration of foreign practices. It also highlights Ahmose’s military strategies and the significance of his campaigns in restoring Egypt’s unity and establishing a new era of prosperity.

Bourriau further elaborates on the complex dynamics between the Hyksos and the native Egyptians, describing how the Hyksos maintained a balance of power through diplomacy and military might. The Theban rulers’ response to Hyksos rule, including the strategic use of propaganda and alliances, is also explored. The chapter emphasizes the

transitional nature of the Second Intermediate Period, showing how the foundations laid during this time were crucial for the advancements of the New Kingdom.

Analysis

Janine Bourriau's chapter reframes the Second Intermediate Period brilliantly, presenting the Hyksos as cultural contributors rather than simple invaders. Her evidence from Tell el-Dab'a, including palaces, trade goods, and Syro-Palestinian artifacts (p. 190), anchors her claim that they enhanced Egypt with innovations like chariots (p. 214) and trade links to Cyprus and the Levant (p. 194). This perspective, bolstered by archaeology and the Kamose stelae, overturns outdated conquest myths. However, her reliance on Tell el-Dab'a introduces a logical flaw. She notes Memphis's persistent Egyptian culture, with Middle Bronze Age traits under 2% of pottery (p. 196), but emphasizes Avaris's hybridity instead. This skew suggests she overstates Hyksos influence nationwide, sidelining Lower Egypt's native resilience and tilting her narrative toward a Delta-centric bias.

Bourriau's focus on Thebes' strategies also falters. She vividly describes Kamose's raid and Ahmose's siege of Avaris (pp. 211-213), attributing reunification to military success, yet skims over earlier political consolidation. The Turin Canon lists 16th and 17th Dynasty kings (p. 203), hinting at sustained Theban control amid chaos, but she fixates on late victories. This omission questions her transitional thesis: if New Kingdom roots grew earlier, why ignore Thebes' diplomatic or administrative efforts? Her military lens feels narrow when historical overviews often stress decades of Theban endurance.

Finally, her portrayal of Nubian dynamics lacks depth. She cites Kamose's recapture of Buhen (p. 207) and Kerma Nubians in Theban ranks (p. 209), casting Kush as a Hyksos ally defeated by Thebes. Yet, she downplays Kerma's independent trade with both regions (p. 208), evidenced by gold and pottery, which highlights Kush's strategic agency. This oversimplification reduces Kush to a passive player and weakens her southern frontier analysis. Though these gaps limit her scope, Bourriau's evidence-rich study remains a valuable contribution, enhanced by a broader regional lens.