

The Relations between Egypt and the Land of Canaan during the Third Millennium B.C.

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Archaeological investigation in Israel and the Sinai during the last decade has produced new data relevant to the problem of relations between Egypt and Canaan during the third millennium B.C. It is therefore an appropriate time to sum up the available evidence on the very existence of such relations, and to assess its significance for the determination of the nature of those relations. This is not the place to enumerate *all* the findings which have a bearing on our problem, and a general survey of these should suffice.

The extensive excavations at Tel Arad, directed by Ruth Amiran, undoubtedly furnished the most significant and relevant information. The fortified city of Arad flourished during a period from the middle of the first Egyptian Dynasty through the end of Dynasty II (EB II in Palestinian terminology). The ceramic assemblage is mainly Canaanite; however, it also includes a small number of Egyptian sherds indicating relations between Egypt and this south Palestinian site. The most important find, a fragment of an Egyptian vessel bearing an incised *serekh* of King Narmer, is attributed to the pre-urban level at Arad. The artifact was found in a clearly dated EB I context, and beyond its importance for the subject at hand, it is significant in establishing an absolute chronology for EB I. A similar find was unearthed some 20 years ago at another important site in southern Canaan—Tel Gath. There, as at Arad, the context is EB I, but, unlike Arad, the ceramic repertoire is predominantly Egyptian.

In recent years several small sites in southern Canaan, in which the pottery assemblage is predominantly Archaic Egyptian, were investigated. Noticeable among those are Tel Maahaz and 'En Besor. From the latter site are some 30 clay bullae, bearing impressions of Egyptian cylinder seals and probably dating to the reign of Den. There are also an Egyptian cylinder seal, probably of the Archaic Period, from the Sharon Plain, and a clay cylinder seal from Gezer, probably of local workmanship,

which bears Egyptian motifs, the most noteworthy of which is a depiction of the early Egyptian shrine, the *pr-wr*.

Several Egyptian stone vessels form part of the equipment of the temple at 'Ay. The group dates to the Archaic Period. One of these vessels, a copy in alabaster of a waterskin, is undoubtedly of cultic nature.

Also noteworthy is an EB I tomb excavated at Azor, in which several Egyptian artifacts are included among the abundant, mainly local, grave goods, especially three Egyptian vessels and a flint knife similar to the one known from Gebel-el-'Arak. Of great significance is the fact that some of the skeletal remains in the Azor tomb, according to osteological type, are of "African" origin (i.e. Egyptian), in contrast to the majority which were local.

In Egypt the finds of Canaanite origin consist mainly of clay vessels, as well as several graphic depictions on wooden and ivory "labels" of "Canaanites" bearing Canaanite vessels. The chronological span of these finds in Egypt is Late Proto-Dynastic through the Archaic Period (EB I-EB II). The most important group among those Canaanite vessels is the one known as "Abydos Ware."

The archaeological evidence may thus be summarized as follows:

1. In several small sites in southern Canaan ('En Besor, Tel Maahaz) Egyptian wares comprise about 90% of the entire ceramic repertoire. Such sites were probably inhabited by Egyptians, as a larger city in the region, Tel Gath, likely was. The presence of Egyptians in Canaan may also be attested in the Azor cemetery;
2. Sporadic finds of Egyptian origin have appeared at other sites in the region (Arad, Tel Halif) which were most probably Canaanite settlements;
3. Artifacts of Egyptian royal or administrative nature were unearthed at several sites (Arad, Gath, 'En Besor, the Sharon seal), while other Egyptian

finds are of an apparently cultic nature ('Ay, the Gezer seal);

4. On the Egyptian side the indications for contact with Canaan are much less varied, and comprise mainly Canaanite vessels in predominantly Egyptian assemblages;

5. The relations between the two countries seem to have started during the Late Pre-Dynastic Period, then abruptly cease at the end of the Archaic Period.

Archaeological investigation of the Sinai during the last decade has produced a wealth of relevant material. This may be summarized as follows:

A. *North Sinai*: A thorough survey of the main route connecting Egypt and Palestine, conducted by E. Oren and others, has revealed scores of small, semi-permanent sites. The majority of these sites date to the Archaic Period, and they were abandoned by its end. The ceramic assemblage is mainly Egyptian; however, some sites located at both extremities of this route contain predominantly Canaanite pottery;

B. *West Sinai Mines*: Egyptian activity in this area was no earlier than the Old Kingdom;

C. *South Sinai*: Y. Beit-Arieh's work in the valleys of the great granite massif of southern Sinai revealed a large number of small sites:

1. The *raison d'être* of these settlements is the extraction of copper from the mines in the region. Evidence for the mining as well as smelting of copper was noted in many of these settlements;

2. The architectural features of the dwellings in those sites have exact parallels at Arad, more than 300 km. north in southern Canaan;

3. The closest parallels for the flint and copper tools, as well as shell beads found in southern Sinai, are also at Arad:

4. The ceramic assemblage is predominantly Canaanite. The resemblance of the pottery to that of Arad goes beyond similarity in shape. Clay analyses show that the clay of some of the vessels found at Arad came from south Sinai, while some of the Sinai vessels were made of clay originating in the Arad region;

5. Finally, the close relation between the south Sinai sites and Arad is demonstrated by the fact that the *floruit* of the south Sinai sites is EB II,

Arad's acme. With the abandonment of Arad, at the end of EB III, came that of sites in south Sinai.

Therefore, the south Sinai sites must be inhabited by Canaanite colonists from Arad (or southern Canaan). They were engaged in the production of copper, to meet the needs of the population of Canaan. Egyptian colonists engaged in copper mining lived at Buhen and Toshka, among other sites in Nubia, during the same period.

How does the foregoing information help us assess the nature of the relations between Egypt and Canaan during this period? Are they commercial, or was Egypt for all or part of the period in actual control of southern Canaan? The existing archaeological evidence is "mute:" we lack any unequivocal historical records.

In the mid-1950s, prior to the discovery of the bulk of the pertinent archaeological material, an Egyptian military campaign into southern Canaan was postulated by Yadin, based on his interpretation of one of the signs on Narmer's slate palette. This contention was supported by some scholars, especially in light of subsequent discoveries of Egyptian artifacts in southern Canaan. Others rejected Yadin's interpretation of the sign on the Narmer palette and view the Egyptian artifacts as signs of trade.

The engraving of a besieged city and accompanying fragmentary inscription from the tomb of Inti at Deshasheh (Dynasty V), as well as the accounts of the series of military campaigns of Weni, general of Pepi I (Dynasty VI), point to Egyptian raids into southern Canaan. During these campaigns fortified cities were destroyed, vines and fig trees—flora typical of that region—were uprooted.

One should stress again the total absence of any Egyptian artifacts dating to the Old Kingdom from the Land of Canaan. In striking contrast, such artifacts are found in abundance at Byblos, down to the very end of the Old Kingdom. These facts seem to indicate that, from Late Pre-Dynastic times to the end of the Archaic period, Egypt maintained trade relations with Canaan (particularly in the south) as well as with Syria (Byblos). During this time the Egyptians also established traders' colonies in this region. These settlers, however, must not have exercised political or military

control over Canaan, an area which itself sent its own colonists as far away as southern Sinai. These reciprocal trade relations are attested archaeologically by the numerous artifacts of Archaic Egyptian origin in southern Canaan. For some as yet unknown reason, these trade relations were severed at the end of the Archaic Period, a situation reflected in the absence of any Egyptian artifacts of Old Kingdom date from Canaan. Egypt did, however, maintain commercial relations with Syria (Byblos), while occasional military raids seem to have been the major contact with southern Canaan.

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Comment

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The presence of Early Dynastic Egyptian materials and the absence of later Old Kingdom materials in Palestinian contexts make some sense from the standpoint of changing political relationships. When the balance of power among more or less equal trading partners tips in favor of one polity, interaction tends to become one-sided and may escalate in intensity from simple hostility and periodic raiding upon the weakest through various kinds of tribute relations to ultimate conquest and occupation by the strongest. Many ethnographically known tribal societies exhibit predatory behavior of this sort. Notable among them are the Old World nomadic pastoral groups that have overrun settled civilizations during periods of weakness. More pertinent to the problem, the expansion of states creates similar conditions in

which economic or administrative changes may be imposed upon surrounding, less politically integrated peoples. Examples with good archaeological and historical documentation are Roman Gaul of the 1st century B.C. and the Valley of Mexico during the rise to power of Aztec Tenochtitlan in the 15th century A.C.

Early Dynastic Egyptian contact with Palestinian city-states may have been commercial in nature. Later cessation of these relationships as a result of retrenchment, isolationism or some other restraint on Egyptian foreign affairs seems unlikely

in view of Egypt's position of increasing power and control over resources at the beginning of the pyramid age. Rather, one might think Egypt had become too important to maintain old protocols with politically inferior Asiatics. What Egypt needed it could take with relative impunity, whether the object consisted of booty from raiding settled areas or raw materials brought back by mining expeditions. The changing patterns of archaeological deposition may reflect the disruption of the earlier, more symbiotic, exchange relationships in the wake of fundamental power shifts.