Egyptian-Canaanite Relations in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages as Reflected by Scarabs

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Abstract

At all times, Egyptian-Canaanite relations reflected political developments in both regions, and were therefore never static but an ongoing process. The second millennium BCE saw two crucial developments occurring respectively in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. The first is a gradual infiltration and settlement of Canaanites in the eastern Delta, which resulted in the presence of a highly Egyptianized Canaanite Middle Bronze culture in this region, and the rule of a dynasty of Canaanite origin in northern Egypt. The second is a long-lasting Egyptian empire in Canaan with military and administrative presence. This paper will attempt to show that scarabs provide key evidence for the understanding of Egyptian-Canaanite relations in the second millennium BCE, stressing the differences between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages.

The potential contribution of the large number of scarabs from 2nd millennium contexts in Egypt and the Levant has long been realized, especially for research of Egyptian Canaanite relations. Most studies dealing with these scarabs have focused on the first half of the second millennium. A comprehensive study of the period encompassing the New Kingdom in Egypt and the Late Bronze Age in Palestine has yet to be published, and our knowledge of scarabs of this period is therefore preliminary and partial. Nevertheless, it is still possible

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2 E.g. Giveon, “Royal Seals of the XIIth Dynasty from Western Asia”; Giveon, The Impact of Egypt on Canaan, 73-107; 3 See the publications noted above, which include additional bibliography.
4 For studies of particular scarabs of this period, see e.g. Jaeger, Scarabée Menkhéper-re; Keel, “Der Ägyptische Gott Ptah”; Uehlinger, “Der Amun-Tempel Ramses’ III in p3-Kn’re”; Wiese, Zum Bild des Königs; Brandl, “The Cape Gelidonya Shipwreck Scarabs”; Brandl, “Scarabs and
to present a general picture of the implications of scarabs from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages in the southern Levant.

Scarabs were the most popular form of amulet in ancient Egypt and for a short period of time they were also used as seals for the central administration. Their initial production was in the First Intermediate Period, and not too long afterwards, once the land was reunited in the early Middle Kingdom, they were first exported outside of Egypt. The exportation of scarabs was not only an expression of Egyptian commercial contacts, but also a manifestation of Egyptian cultural influence. Egyptian scarabs of the early Middle Kingdom have been found at Byblos and on the island of Crete, reflecting Egypt’s commercial and cultural contacts with both regions during this period. Isolated early Middle Kingdom scarabs were also found in Palestine, but they come exclusively from later archaeological contexts. The only possible exceptions are two scarabs from a salvage excavation of a poorly preserved MBIIA tomb in the Qirya quarter of Tel Aviv, but the exact phase of the MBIIA in which they were found is uncertain, and the context of these scarabs may also be later than their date of production.

The earliest securely dated evidence for the use of scarabs in Palestine is a group of some 50 clay sealings from mid MBIIA contexts at Ashkelon, a find that is so far unique outside the Nile valley. These sealings, which sealed various containers, were stamped with late Middle Kingdom Egyptian scarabs dating mainly from the 13th Dynasty. Identical in every respect to sealings from late Middle Kingdom administrative units in Egypt and Lower Nubia, the Ashkelon sealings display a distinctive late Middle Kingdom administrative practice. The 13th Dynasty date indicated by their designs was assigned also to their contexts, as the pottery associated with them has parallels in the Canaanite pottery from stratum G99 – see Ben-Tor, Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections, 15; Keel, Corpus, Band I, 82-83, no. 15 – see Ben-Tor, Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections, 118.

5 Hornung and Staehelin, Skarabäen aus Basler Sammlungen; Ward, Pre-12th Dynasty Scarab Amulets; Keel, Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette.
6 Ben-Tor, Scarabs, Chronology and Interconnections, 5-9 with bibliography.
7 Ward, Pre-12th Dynasty Scarab Amulets.
8 Ben-Tor, “The Absolute Date of the Montet Jar Scarabs”; Ben-Tor, “Early Egyptian Scarabs on Crete.”
9 E.g. Keel, Corpus, Band I, 138-39, no.