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Observations on the earliest phase of relations between Egypt and Canaan during the Early Bronze Age

Fieldwork carried out in southern Israel and Egypt during recent years has enabled a reassessment of the relations between Egypt and Canaan during the Early Bronze Age. In the wake of this fieldwork, several articles attempting a synthesis of the new data have been published, the most recent by Ben-Tor (1991) and Ward (1991). However, these syntheses focus mainly on the relations between the two regions during the late Early Bronze I and Early Bronze II, that is during Naqada IIc-d, Naqada III and the First and Second Dynasty periods. Unfortunately this has led to the almost complete neglect of the question of how and why these relations began already in the earliest phase of the Early Bronze I (Naqada IIb-c; Amiran & Gophna 1992). How did it happen that the Lower Egyptian Maadians, inferior in their material culture to the contemporary Upper Egyptian Naqadians, were the ones to initiate and lay the foundations for long-term mutual relations with southern Canaan, which lasted some 300 years? (Amiran & Gophna 1992). The investigation of six sites in southern Israel, all dating to the earliest phase of the Early Bronze Age I, combined with the long-awaited publication of the excavations at Maadi, Lower Egypt (Rizkana & Seeher 1987; 1988; 1989; 1990), permits one to speculate on the earliest beginnings of the relations between southern Canaan and Lower Egypt (Fig. 1).

The impressive range of Canaanite finds unearthed at Maadi, mostly pottery containers (probably for olive oil), flints, copper implements and lumps of asphalt, pointing to substantial trade relations between Lower Egypt and southern Canaan during Naqada IIb-c, along with the discovery of Egyptian finds at several southern Canaan sites (see below), induced Rizkana and Seeher to characterize these relations as a mechanism of trade between Lower Egypt and Canaan and to interpret the function and character of the site known as Site H, in southern Canaan (Macdonald 1932) accordingly:

"The assumed trade route along the eastern fringe of the Delta bears a very important implication: much of the Palestinian merchandise found at Maadi might well have been conveyed there by Egyptian intermediaries who had obtained this

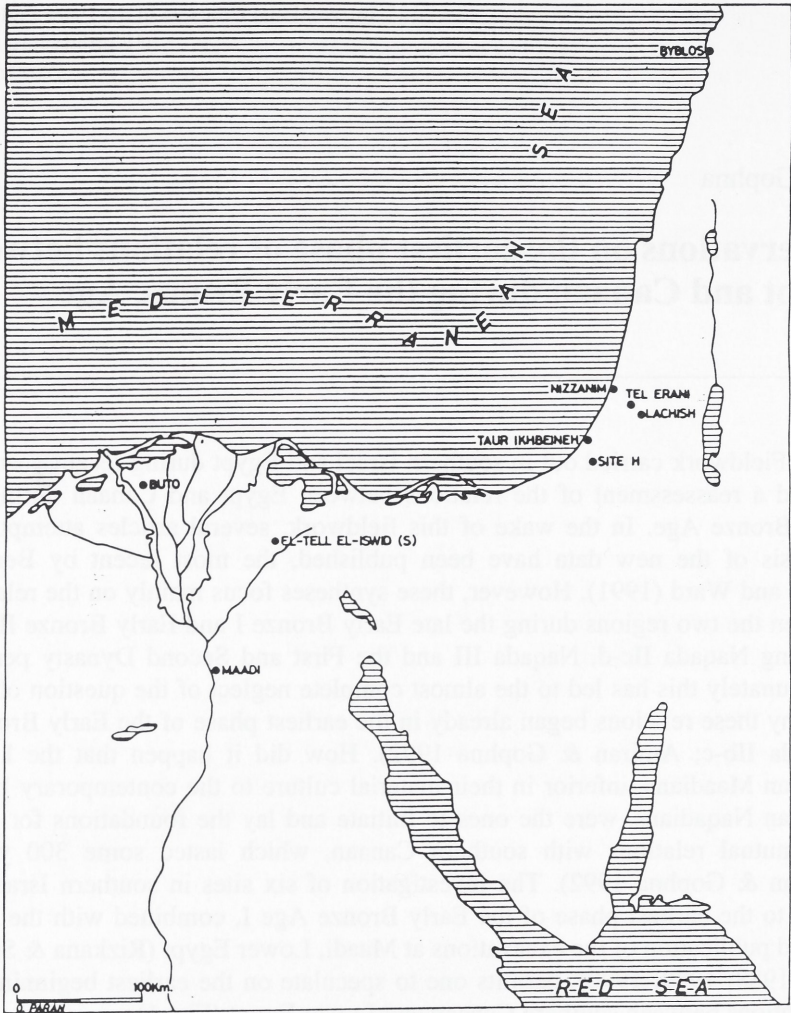


Fig. 1. Early Bronze 1a sites in southern Canaan and contemporary sites in Lower Egypt.

material from easterners somewhere at the eastern Delta. At the eastern edge of the Delta there must have been a province of (direct and probably also constant and intensive contact and exchange between Egyptians and Palestinians). Probably merchants from both groups were involved in the trade, and so exchanged elements of their culture."

"The fact that copper from Fenan has recently been identified at Site H adds to the significance of the Egyptian finds (at Site H). The site may have been a

'caravansary' for the copper trade to Lower Egypt, and in the excavation report (of Site H) it is mentioned that large quantities of copper ... lay at all levels" (Rizkana & Seeher 1989: 79).

Clarification of the circumstances in which the relations between the two countries evolved, seen from the Canaanite perspective, and analysis of the finds from the six early EB I sites in southern Israel mentioned above, allows us to sketch out another scenario for the earliest relations between Lower Egypt and southern Canaan during the Early Bronze Age. Two of these sites, Site H (Macdonald 1932) and Lachish Northwest Settlement (Tufnell 1958), were excavated in the thirties, while the other four, Tell 'Erani (Kempinski & Gilead 1991), Taur Ikhbeineh (Oren & Yekutieli 1992), Tel Halif (Seger et al. 1990: 2-9) and Nizzanim (Wolff 1991: 503) were investigated quite recently.

The pottery from the six EB I sites mentioned above indicates a distinctive, highly Egyptianized, regional variant of early EB I culture, traces of which were found in southern Canaan from Nahal Lachish in the north to Nahal Besor (Wadi Ghazze) in the south (Gophna 1992).

The collapse of the Chalcolithic-Ghassulian culture and the total abandonment of its settlement system in southern Canaan, sometime around 3600-3500 B.C. (Gilead 1988: Table 1; Fig. 2), created a void that was filled by the infiltration of Lower Egyptian groups which had gradually expanded into northern Sinai, and eventually settled in southern Canaan. This kind of ethnic diffusion could not have happened during the Chalcolithic, before the latest phases of the Maadi-Buto culture of Lower Egypt. The archaeological data from Israel so far, indicates that relations between the two countries during the Chalcolithic were only sporadic (Levy 1992: 353).

Contrary to the assumption that the trade between the two countries during this period (Early Bronze I) was carried on by "Egyptian intermediaries who had obtained (the commodities) from easterners somewhere at the eastern Delta", or that "merchants from both groups (i.e., from Egypt and from Canaan) were involved in the trade, and so exchanged elements of their culture" (Rizkana & Seeher 1989: 79), I would like to suggest that these merchants were part of the Egyptianized population that had become established at these above-mentioned sites in southern Canaan, as a result of the influx of Lower Egyptian groups into that region. This population was responsible for the creation of a hybrid culture - the result of the interaction of two distinct cultural groups - of a somewhat different character from the EB culture prevalent in the rest of the country (Gophna 1992: 391-392). It would appear that this hybrid culture formed the basis for the ongoing process of Egyptian infiltration and colonization till the end of the Early Bronze Age I, that is during Naqada IIc-d - Naqada III and the beginning of the First Dynasty period. However, in the latter period (middle and late EB I), the trade relations between the two countries not only intensified but also encompassed Upper Egypt as well. Moreover, this was the period when the formation of a united Egyptian polity was taking place and the trade relations between Egypt and Canaan ap-

pear to have been in the nature of an organized state-sponsored trade network. This may be inferred from the nature of the finds at sites in southern Israel (Tell 'Erani, En Besor, Tel Maahaz, Arad and others) (Gophna 1992: 392). I suggest that the earliest phase of the expansion of Lower Egyptian groups into southern Canaan during the Early Bronze Age I was motivated not only by the quest for basic raw materials and processed goods (asphalt, copper, timber and olive oil), but also by the desire to settle new lands. This development took place before the great expansion of the Upper Egyptian Naqada IIc-d culture into the Delta.

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