

## Chapter 9

# Egyptian imports on the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I sites in the Southern Levant

Trade exchange between Lower Egyptian and Southern Canaanite communities resulted in bilateral flow of goods and information. Assemblages from Chalcolithic and EB I sites in the Levant contain Egyptian items and implements. In return for copper, pigments, stone and pottery vessels (usually serving as containers for other goods), small basalt discs, flint implements and probably a whole array of organic products that left no traces in archeological material such as asphalt, resins, olive, cedar wood, skins of animals, domestic animals and other agricultural produce, Egyptians could offer to Southern Levantines basalt vessels, flint implements, meat, fish, Nile shells, probably beer and materials unavailable in the east, such as gold. Egyptian pottery vessels were also sent to the Southern Levant, but again usually as containers for other goods.

### 1. POTTERY

Egyptian pottery dated to Naqada I and IIB(C) is known from a number of sites in the Southern Levant (Fig. 2): Site H in En Besor, Tel Erani D, Azor, Zeita, Taur Ikhbeineh, Niz-zannim, Lachish (NW), Gilat and in the Atlit Bay (Hartung 1994: 108; Watrin 1998: 1220).

Chalcolithic and Early Bronze layers from Site H in En Besor contain Egyptian pottery dated to Naqada IIB-C. It is represented first of all by undiagnostic fragments of black and reddish-brown ware known from the Delta sites, *e.g.* at Maadi, Wadi Digla II, Tell el-Farkha 1-2 and Buto I-II. Similarly, pottery covered with red slip (P-ware) with distinctive zigzag pattern is believed to be of Egyptian origin (Gophna 1992: 388-390; 1995a: 267-268; Andelković 1995: fig. 12; Tutundžić 1997: 9-11). However, it needs to be remembered that in Lower Egypt the zigzag motive is found usually on rough ware with no slip. Only one P-ware fragment decorated with a zigzag has been found so far, in Buto (von der Way 1997: 97).

Inventories from the settlement of Taur Ikhbeineh, located 17km to the south east of En Besor, contained Egyptian pottery dated to the second half of Naqada II (Hartung 2001: Abb. 70). The more interesting finds include mid-size jars with burnished surface covered with red slip (Petrie's P40) as well as small rough ware jars (Petrie's R33) (Oren & Yekutiel: 1992: 368-369). Pottery with analogous or very similar features was found in Buto II (von der Way 1993: 36, fig. 4:6) and Tell el-Iswid A (van den Brink 1989: 70-71, fig. 11:15).

The presence of Egyptian pottery in the Southern Levant was also confirmed by petrographic analyses of ceramic samples from EB IA layers on the following 4 sites: Tel Erani, Ma'ahaz, Taur Ikhbeinch oraz En Besor (Porat 1986/87: 109-129; Oren & Yekutieli 1992: 366).

Most recent archeological explorations in today's Israel revealed Egyptian pottery also on the sites in Gilat and Gat Guvrin/Zeita (Commenge & Alon 2002: 144). In Gilat, a few sherds of Naqada I burnished ware were discovered among a total of 10000 vessels found there. Importantly, the number of Egyptian pottery registered on Israeli territory is still very low when compared to pottery manufactured locally. More intensive archeological research and the ensuing greater understanding of Chalcolithic communities in the Southern Levant have not contributed significantly to new discoveries. E. Braun and E.C.M. van den Brink (2008: 650) list major Chalcolithic sites in today's Israel, *i.e.* Modi'in, Shoham, Horbat Govit, where no Egyptian imports have been recorded.

The amount of Egyptian pottery is greater on sites dated to EB I. Particularly interesting are vessels described by Israeli archeologists as drop-shaped jars, known from EB I context in Afridar Area F, Site H, Gat Guvrin/Zeita and Lachish (Braun & van den Brink 2008: 654-655). According to some researchers, such as Y. Baumgarten (2004: 169) and A. Golani (2004: 46), in terms of shape, these vessels resemble similar vessels known from Maadi (Rizkana & Seeher 1987: pl. 7.2-4) and must have been introduced to the Southern Levant from Egypt. However, in the opinion of E. Braun & E.C.M. van den Brink (2008: 654) the prevalence of these vessels in EB I contexts suggests that they were manufactured locally. Nonetheless, both researchers admit that the form itself could have been adapted from the Delta.

Apart from imported pottery, EB I sites also revealed local imitations of Egyptian vessels. An interesting find was discovered in En Besor, where imported pottery was accompanied by locally made pottery bearing many Egyptian features. Most researchers believe that their production involved typically Egyptian techniques and local clay. To describe this phenomenon, S.P. Tutundžić (1997: 11) coined the phrase "Egyptianization of pottery". R. Gophna (1992: 390) identified two varieties of vessels of this kind in En Besor: vessels with typically Egyptian shapes made of local clay, and vessels of Levantine typology and technology manufactured using typically Egyptian techniques. The first of those two groups included hole-mouth jars, drop-shaped jars and bag-shaped jars. The other group contained semi-spherical bowls, hole-mouth jars and jars with characteristic lug- and ledge-handles (*e.g.* jars with cylindrical necks known from Maadi). All of those items were found in EB IA layers.

Local origin of this pottery was confirmed by means of petrographic analyses. On that basis N. Porat (1986/87: 117-119) concluded that paste used to manufacture quasi Egyptian vessels differed from paste used with typically Levantine pottery. While local ware was made from clay coming from various sedimentary rocks, imitations of Egyptian ware were made

of loess clay. Local pottery and imitations of foreign forms differed not only in terms of the choice of material, but also as regards the choice of temper and firing temperature. Local clay was tempered with mineral filler made of crushed stones, and loess clay was tempered with organic materials, such as straw, chaff and dung. Egyptianized pottery was fired at temperatures exceeding 800°C, while the average temperature used for local pottery was 700°C. A number of typological differences existed too. Locally manufactured pottery was used for preparing and consuming food, while Egyptian imports were used for storage and transportation of goods.

According to R. Gophna (1992: 392), pottery analysis suggests the existence of a pottery workshop on Site H in En Besor, employing Egyptian potters possessing skills acquired in their homeland. They manufactured both Egyptian vessels and their Southern Levantine imitations. According to that researcher, the settlement in En Besor oasis was supposedly established in EB IA by a group of immigrants from the Delta, representing the Lower Egyptian culture. The underlying reasons for their migration included obtaining access to materials and products unavailable in the Delta and subsequent orchestration of a system for supplying them to the Delta. This interpretation is opposed by S.P. Tutundžić (1997: 11), according to whom the presence of Egyptianized pottery was not necessarily related to Lower Egyptian presence in En Besor. He is of the opinion that the emergence of Egyptian techniques and shapes among EB IA pottery in En Besor resulted from their adaptation by local potters. The proximity of both regions was apparently conducive to mutual contacts and exchanging technical novelties. For talented potters, diversifying their professional repertoire by adding innovative manufacturing techniques, surface finishes or vessel forms was not prohibitively difficult. Motivation for such choices is explained by the nature of the contemporary communities. The inhabitants of Site H lived at the turn of two periods (Chalcolithic and Early Bronze). Sudden changes in settlement patterns and in culture encouraged flexibility and acceptance of the new. Shifting conditions coupled with a semi-nomadic subsistence strategy made Levantine communities more open to change, as compared to more conservative farming communities (Tutundžić 1997: 14). On the basis of source materials available, the hypothesis by R. Gophna seems more plausible, particularly because the presence of Egyptians in En Besor was also confirmed in the later period, when the site hosted an important Egyptian administration center controlling the trade exchange. The presence of an Egyptian group in EB IA could have resulted from a greater interest in Levantine territories in general, and materials available there in particular. The process initiated in the said period continued into the period to come. References to specific mentality and way of thinking of Early Bronze community are unwarranted from the perspective of the results of last years' studies. The turn of the Chalcolithic and EB I involved important social and economic changes (see Chapter 3). It is difficult to make any conclusions on the influence of those processes on people's everyday lives and ways of thinking. S. Tutundžić interprets the behaviors of an Early Bronze society by applying a template developed on the basis of ethnographic

studies involving modern pastoral communities affected by crisis. Furthermore, it is difficult to accept a view that Levantine potters, whose own tradition of pottery making was in many ways superior to that from the Predynastic Delta, would begin to make their vessels in a totally different way, for odd and rather irrational reasons (as seen from our perspective). One should remember that while adaptation of new forms and techniques is possible, ethnoarchaeological studies show that its completion takes 2 to 3 generations of potters (Arnold 1979: 753). Therefore, given the current state of research, Egyptianized pottery should be interpreted through the presence of migrants from the Delta in En Besor.

An interesting discovery was made several years ago at Atlit, which could have been a stopover port for ships on the route along the coast of today's Israel. During construction works carried out under water, a storage jar filled with 18 *Aspatharia rubens* shells was found. In terms of form, the vessel is reminiscent of jars with a short neck, globular body and narrow mouth, known from Maadi (Ware III). Petrographic analyses showed that the jar from Atlit was made of alluvial Nile clay tempered with crushed limestone, typical for Levantine pottery. Small knobs in the upper part of the jar are another eastern feature. On that basis it was concluded that the Atlit jar is a crossover of Egyptian and Levantine features, dated by analogy to Naqada IIB-C. The relative chronology was confirmed by radiocarbon dating of the shells, which – after calibration – indicated a period between 3720 and 3380 BC (Sharvit *et al.* 2002: 159-166).

## 2. STONE AND FLINT ITEMS

Apart from pottery, Levantine sites also contain Egyptian stone items, such as fragments of greywacke palettes and marble maceheads, found in the Chalcolithic Yotvata (Watrin 1998: 1220) and in Teleilat Ghassul (Bourke 2002: 155-156). Travertine was registered in Gilat, Teleilat Ghassul and En Gedi (Watrin 1998: 1220). Attention is drawn to the bottom of a cylindrical travertine vessel (commonly found in Egypt during Naqada I), discovered in the so-called Ghassulian shrine in En Gedi (Ussishkin 1971: 32-33; 1980: 21, 24-25; Hartung 2001: Abb. 68). A fragment of a travertine bowl and a travertine palette were found in the Chalcolithic settlement in En Besor (Tutundžić 1997: 10). Other imports from Egypt included semi-precious stones, such as carnelian, found *e.g.* in Nahal-Qanah and Ghassul (Watrin 1998: 1220). It also seems likely that two disc-shaped maceheads from the Chalcolithic site in Wadi Rayyan in Jordan came from Egypt as well (Lowell 2008: fig. 5). Furthermore, on the site in Gat Guvrin/Zeita a lentoid macehead made of Egyptian gabbro was discovered (Braun & van den Brink 2008: 646, fig. 1).

Site H in En Besor yielded a number of Egyptian flint tools, *e.g.* a Hemamija knife and a leaf-shaped point. The flint assemblage also features semi-finished products, such as blades and bladelets, typical for Lower Egyptian flint-making industry. They are particularly numerous *e.g.* in Buto I, Tell el-Iswid A (Schmidt 1992: 32-33) and Tell Ibrahim Awad 7 (van den Brink 1992b: 53; Tutundžić 1997: 10; Watrin 1998: 1220).

### 3. MISCELLANEA

Other noteworthy materials imported from Egypt include ivory known from the Safadi site in the Beersheba Valley (Watrin 1998: 1217). Chalcolithic layers from Tel Aviv yielded a cylindrical ivory vessel known from Egypt, characteristic for Naqada I (Amiran 1970: 9). Similarly, faience disc beads found in Teleilat Ghassul came from Egypt as well (Bourke 2002: 156). To satisfy the demand of Levantine elites, precious metals (gold and electrum) were imported too. Excavations of Chalcolithic layers in Nahal Qanah yielded eight rings made of gold and electrum, of a total weight of approx. 1 kilogram. Egyptian origin of the material has not been fully confirmed yet. Gold and electrum could have also come from the Eastern Desert, from Anatolia and from Iran (Gopher & Tusk 1991: XXV; 1996: 169, fig. 4.25; Watrin 1998: 1217). Egyptian origin of the material is also possible in the case of a bracelet in the form of snake or spiral from a Chalcolithic burial context at Giv'atayim near Tel Aviv (Braun & van den Brink 2008: 646, fig. 2).

Another interesting discovery from the Southern Levant are shells of *Aspatharia rubens*, sometimes referred to as *Chabardia rubens acurata* (after Braun & van den Brink 2008: 646), coming from the Nile and discovered on Chalcolithic sites in Teleilat Ghassul (approx. 65 items made of this material), Ben-Shemen, Abu-Matar, Horvat-Beter, Arad V, Nahal Mishmar, Shiqmim, Gilat, Grar, Gat Guvrin/Zeita, Yehud and on Early Bronze sites in Site H, Azor and Tell el'Farah, (Rizkana & Seeher 1989: 79; Watrin 1998:1217; Bar-Yosef Mayer 2002: 129-130; Braun & van den Brink 2008: 646-649, fig. 4). The shells could have been used either as containers for cosmetics or as a material used in manufacturing various items, such as spoons, pendants, or fish knives. They could have also been offered as grave goods (Andelković 1995: 24; Bar-Yosef Mayer 2002: 130). E. Braun and E.C.M.van den Brink (2008: 649) noted that the Nile shells were not always accompanied by other artefacts of Egyptian origin or inspiration. Both researchers believe that the shells were distributed throughout the Southern Levant over an extensive trade network used for distributing items or goods other than those coming from Egypt.

Apart from shells, other probable imports from Egypt included *Synodontis* fish, whose bones were discovered on Levantine sites, e.g. in En-Besor, Tel Katif, Namir Road, Tel Aviv (Braun & van den Brink 2008: 649). Due to their unusual shape, first fin rays of *Synodontis* could have also been used as arrow heads and harpoon barbs (McDonald 1932: pl. 26; Harrison 1993: 87; Tutundžić 1997: 10; Watrin 1998: 1220).

It seems that meat could have been exported as well. Analysis of materials recovered from the site in Tell el-Farkha showed a surplus of pig bones from less valuable carcass parts and shortages of bones from good quality parts (e.g. ham). This fact suggests that good quality meat may have been traded (Ablamowicz 2012: 420).

#### 4. SUMMARY

The number of Egyptian imports on Chalcolithic and EB IA sites in the Southern Levant is low. In general, those imports can be divided into two groups. Goods imported from Egypt were first of all luxury items: vessels and implements made of stone, flint, ivory and possibly gold and electrum, as well as food: fish and bivalves, accompanied by pottery vessels used as containers. The other group of items is related to the controversial presence of Lower Egyptians in En Besor and includes pottery vessels with various degrees of Egyptianization. If one assumes that the presence of Egyptians in En Besor in EB IA is probable, then all theories assuming merely occasional nature of Egyptian and Canaanite contacts in the early and middle Predynastic period need to be revised. It seems that Egyptian and Levantine relations were indeed more elaborate. The interest of Egyptians in Canaan in general and its resources in particular must have been so great that they decided to send their representatives to the east. Possibly, their intention was to open a new phase in mutual contacts and exchange. The number of Egyptian items grows on sites dated to EB IB. Elliot Braun (2003: 34-35) grouped Egyptian materials from EB sites into several types based on their character and quantity. The division proposed by him reflects the growth of Egyptian activities and interest in areas east of the Delta. The differentiation results from far more complex nature of contacts, already taking place on a number of different levels.