



AEGYPTIACA IN THE NORTHERN LEVANT: NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE CONTEXTUALIZATION AND RECEPTION OF EGYPTIAN AND EGYPTIANIZING OBJECTS DURING THE BRONZE AGE

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For the reconstruction of the history of intercultural contacts between Egypt and the Levant during the Bronze Age, Egyptian imports found at various sites in the Levant have been considered of prime importance by the scholarly community ever since the inception of archaeological work in the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 19th and early 20th century BC.

Since the beginning of the last century, numerous scholars – both Egyptologists as well as Near Eastern Archaeologists – have dealt with the difficult question of mutual influence and the nature and extent of the political and cultural entanglements between these two regions, especially with regard to the Egyptian objects found in the Levant.

The present author's recently completed PhD thesis submitted to the Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Department of Near Eastern Archaeology, at the University of Bern (Switzerland)¹ deals with Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects found in the region of the northern Levant during the Bronze Age, primarily – although not exclusively – focusing on the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, for which a large quantity of such objects are attested in northern Levantine find contexts. Geographically, the study comprises the regions of modern Lebanon, western Syria, and parts of southern Turkey (Cilicia). It focuses on the contextualization and reception of the Egyptian finds found in these regions, but also tries to explore the objects' social significance (their "Sitz im Leben") for the northern Levantine elites using sociological and ethnological theories.

A thorough compilation of all historical and archaeological data for Egypto-Levantine contacts during the Bronze Age is also presented, which then in turn is analyzed and applied to the spatial distribution of the Egyptian objects found. The catalog of the finds discussed consists of both published and unpublished material and is thus an up-to-date presentation of Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects found in the northern Levant to date.

In the study, the area comprising the northern Levant was divided into different regional sub-regions, each of them featuring at least one or even more major sites that have yielded important Egyptian and/or Egyptianizing objects (Figure 1: Regions A–J).

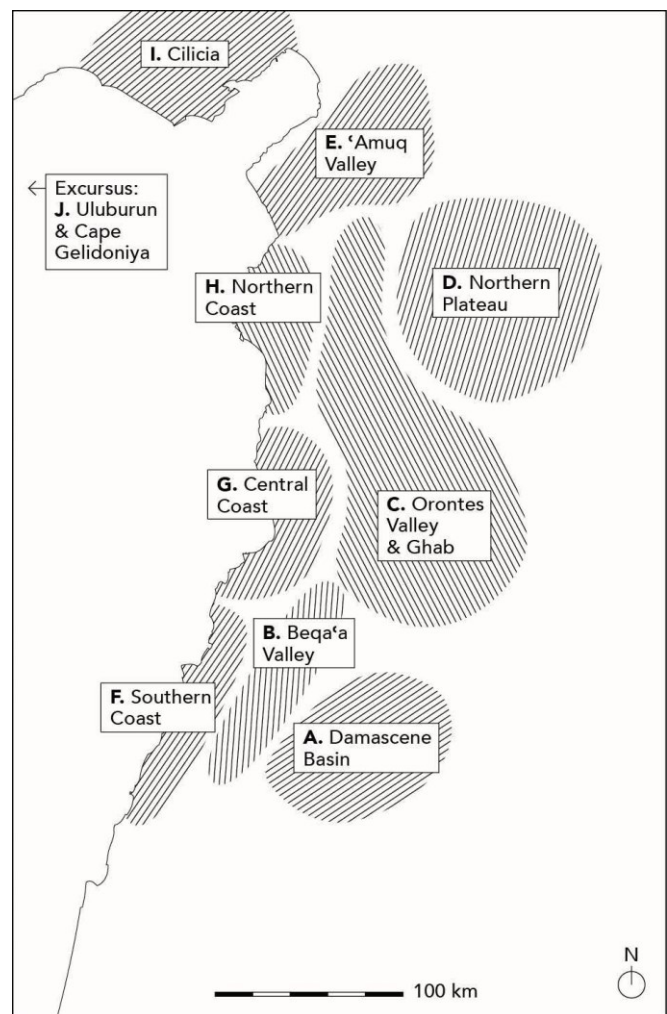


Figure 1: Map of the northern Levant with regional subdivisions dealt with in the present study (map courtesy of the author; map layout and design by Fabienne Kilchör, Studio Emphase/Lausanne).

Alexander Ahrens | *Aegyptiaca* in the Northern Levant

For the reconstruction of the chronological issues and the geographical distribution of Egyptian and Egyptianizing artefacts, the objects were analyzed within their specific archaeological find contexts (most of them being palatial), which – in turn –, were also used to define function and social significance of these finds. Iconographical discussions also led to the differentiation of genuine Egyptian imports and Egyptianizing, but locally produced Levantine objects. An emphasis in the study was put on Egyptian imports that were found in secure archaeological find contexts.

The main results of the study pertain to various aspects of Egypto-Levantine relations. Close relations clearly seem to have existed between the northern Levantine coast and Egypt already since the later part of the Early Bronze Age, with inland central Syria likely to have received Egyptian imports via the important Bronze Age distribution centers along the Levantine littoral, especially Byblos. The city of Byblos remains the main hub for Egyptian contacts with the northern Levant throughout much of the Bronze Age.

It has been argued that during the late Middle Bronze Age, i.e. the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt, contacts between the northern Levant and Egypt were massively reduced or even came to a complete halt. While it seems to be a moot point to try to verify or falsify this assumption on the basis of Egyptian objects found (or not attested) in the northern Levant alone or the (as yet) missing historical sources for such contacts during this period,

several recent discoveries in both Egypt and the northern Levant may shed new light on this question. The fragment of a cuneiform tablet along with seal impressions dating to the late Middle Bronze Age found at Tell el-Dab'a in the eastern Nile Delta, as well as parts of the inventory of Tomb VII at Tell Mišrife/Qatna – including numerous Egyptian objects – may show that contacts still existed during this specific period.

Also during the Late Bronze Age, starting with the 18th Dynasty, the distribution of Egyptian and Egyptianizing artefacts is again largely confined to the Levantine coast, with Egyptian material found only at few sites farther inland, notably at Kāmid el-Lōz/Kumidi and Tell Mišrife/Qatna, both known from the Amarna letters. Again, the coastal centers seem to have been an intermediary for the diffusion of Egyptian objects to the regions farther inland.

Both the historical sources and the Egyptian objects found show that during the 19th Dynasty until the collapse of the Egyptian hegemony over parts of the southern Levant at the end of the Late Bronze Age, the border of Egyptian influence seems to have been largely refined to the coast, and along the regions of the Beqa' Valley and the Damascene Basin farther inland.

For further details and information on the study, please contact the author at alexander.ahrens@iaw.unibc.ch

NOTES

- ¹ In German, entitled "*Aegyptiaca in der nördlichen Levante: Eine Studie zur Kontextualisierung und Rezeption ägyptischer und ägyptisierender Objekte in der Bronzezeit*" (to be published soon).