



CHRONOLOGICAL CONUNDRUMS: EGYPT AND THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE SOUTHERN LEVANT

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INTRODUCTION

The current volume of *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* assembles papers that were given at the member-organized session on “The Middle Bronze Age in the Southern Levant Revisited: Chronology and Connections” at the Annual Meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research in San Antonio, Texas, in November 2016. The session’s goal was to stimulate a renewed discussion on Middle Bronze Age chronology for the southern Levant and its connections with Egypt, as a number of recent radiocarbon sequences from several sites challenge current chronological assessments and, thus, correlations with the historical chronology of Egypt.¹ Changing the chronology of the Middle Bronze Age would have significant impact on current views on history and development of Near Eastern societies during the first half of the second millennium BCE. The articles assembled in this volume can only give a first impression of this debate about historical trajectories, absolute chronology, and how discussion might develop in the future, but we hope that the papers given at the session, as well as their swift publication in this journal, will start a fruitful discussion between scholars studying the manifold relations between the Nile Valley and the Levant during the Middle Bronze Age.

The Middle Bronze Age has been the topic of

several introductory chapters and overview articles, many of them in well-known and frequently used handbooks on the archaeology of the Levant.² But while in recent decades the earlier part of the Middle Bronze Age attracted a great deal of attention by scholars,³ to date few people have studied the later part thoroughly.⁴ Also, we still lack an up-to-date comprehensive synthesis of the whole period. While certain regions, such as the Jordan Valley have been meticulously studied,⁵ comprehensive textbooks such as *Egypt and the Levant: Interrelations from the 4th through early 3rd Millennium B.C.E.*, edited by Edwin van den Brink and Thomas Levy,⁶ or *Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Old Kingdom: An Archaeological Perspective* by Karin Sowada,⁷ are still missing for the Middle Bronze Age.

CHRONOLOGIES

The lack of a recent comprehensive study of the Middle Bronze Age and its setting in ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology in part might be attributed to the manifold chronological uncertainties that still prevail and that hamper attempts for a comprehensive overview of the period. At present, three different approaches of measuring time are in use, which at times can cause a certain amount of confusion.⁸

The Egyptian historical chronology still serves as a backbone for the Bronze Age of the Levant and is

used as a tool for deriving absolute calendrical dates for relative chronological periods all over the eastern Mediterranean. Absolute calendrical dates derive either from “dead-reckoning” (i.e., calculating the lengths of reigns backwards from an assumed fixed point in time) or from astronomic observations (i.e., lunar or Sothic data).⁹ The Egyptian historical chronology allows beginnings and ends of reigns and dynasties to be expressed in calendrical terms and thus structures the *political* history and development of the Nile Valley. Using this method for examination of material culture, whether in Egypt or in neighboring regions, data must first be synchronized with this political chronology, prior to deriving absolute calendrical dates for relative chronological phases.

The relative chronological system of the Levant is essentially an artifact-based chronology, which employs the development of material culture, most notably the changing shape and decoration of pottery as documented in stratified sequences, for chronological purposes. The stratigraphy of certain key sites, such as Tell Beit Mirsim, Megiddo, or Tel Aphek, have come to be fundamental for establishing a relative chronological system for the Middle Bronze Age.¹⁰ The relative chronological system of the Levant (but also of Cyprus or the Aegean) allows the (temporal) ordering of a given context in respect to other contexts, thus concluding that assemblage x has to be dated earlier/later than assemblage y. It is an independent approach to chronology and *a priori* detached from historical chronologies (see above) or scientific chronologies (see below). In order to outline the broader history of the ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean, the relative chronological system has to be synchronized with the historical chronology of Egypt. This can only be done for periods where sufficient interaction between Egypt and the Levant occurred by analyzing Levantine objects found in dateable contexts in the Nile Valley and Egyptian objects in dateable archaeological contexts in the Levant. In periods of limited interaction and exchange, a chronological synchronization can prove to be difficult or even impossible due to lack of sufficient data for analysis.

The third approach to absolute chronology consists of scientific dating methods, such as radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology, or similar techniques. Radiocarbon dating provides a direct link between an (organic) object and an absolute calendrical date expressed as a probability

distribution on the timeline.¹¹ It is important to note that a radiocarbon date is not inherently a date for the archaeological context, but rather a date for the point in time when the dated organic sample ceased exchanging carbon with the environment (i.e., the death of the object dated). Depending on the archaeological context and the dated object, the result can be regarded as a *terminus post quem* (i.e., timber from a building) or an approximate *terminus ad quem* (e.g., short-lived cultigens in a storage jar). Radiocarbon dating allows independent chronological reconstructions in different regions, avoiding any co-dependencies between chronological systems.

In one way or another, the current field of Near Eastern archaeology must engage with all three different approaches to absolute chronology. While for a long time, relative chronological models and the Egyptian historical chronology were dominant throughout scholarship of the ancient Near East, recent decades have seen increasing use and application of radiocarbon dating in Bronze Age Near Eastern archaeology, the results of which often challenge long-held historical reconstructions and synchronisms. In particular, radiocarbon dating has resulted in higher chronologies for much of the Bronze Age than previously have been in standard use. The current trend of raising the absolute dates of Middle Bronze Age chronology based on radiocarbon dating will have significant impact on how we interpret archaeological sources and reconstruct historical trajectories. This in turn raises a few key questions in Egyptian–Levantine interconnections, where a thorough understanding of absolute chronology for historical events and archaeological assemblages are crucial for any interpretation and require thorough reassessment in light of the proposed new high radiocarbon chronology of the Middle Bronze Age Levant.

NEW QUESTIONS FOR THE “DAWN OF INTERNATIONALISM”

Over twenty years ago, David Ilan¹² described the Middle Bronze Age as “the dawn of Internationalism.” Indeed, after the deurbanized social structure dominant in the Intermediate Bronze Age, the Middle Bronze Age saw the rise of urban sites throughout the southern Levant, accompanied by increased external relations with Egypt, Cyprus, and the Aegean, as well as with Mesopotamia.

As noted above, the relations of Middle Bronze Age Levant with Middle Kingdom and Second

Intermediate Period Egypt are of primary concern for the current volume, and textual sources often provide significant evidence for reconstructing Egyptian–Levantine connections. Texts like the Mit Rahina inscription of Amenemhet II are of paramount importance for assessing the quality and extent of commercial relations, the amount and nature of imported goods, the frequency of commercial expeditions, and Egyptian impact on southern Levantine societies.¹³ It has been argued that “along the eastern Mediterranean littoral, this trade may have been a catalyst that spurred maritime ventures, coastal settlement and urbanization.”¹⁴ In order to understand fully the importance of this maritime trade, it is first necessary to know what era and which developments in the southern Levant are contemporary with Amenemhet II.

Similarly, another text that shows the potential significance of Egyptian involvement in the Levant is the historical inscription of Khnumhotep at Dahshur.¹⁵ This text reports a conflict between two central Levantine entities (Byblos and Ullaza) and a potential Egyptian military intervention, most likely during the reign of Senwosret III. It further reports the change in the title of the ruler of Byblos, leading to the hypothesis that “the events recorded by Khnumhotep may even have been the impetus for the change or rule in Byblos to a governor (*h³tj-^c*) rather than a *malku* later in the 12th Dynasty.”¹⁶ For understanding the historical implications of the events described in this text, it is of signal importance to know with which relative chronological period the reign of Senwosret III has to be equated — with the early Middle Bronze I, with the late Middle Bronze I, or with the Middle Bronze I/II transitional period?

On the other hand, we know of Egyptian or Egyptianizing murals in the enigmatic late Middle Bronze I fortified building on the Mediterranean shore of Lebanon at Tell el-Burak.¹⁷ Parallels in the Beni Hassan tombs of the early 12th Dynasty have been put forward, but according to the traditional and low chronologies of the Middle Bronze Age, Tell el-Burak was thought to be contemporary with the late 12th or early 13th Dynasty. Recent radiocarbon dates, however, show conclusively that the building must be dated significantly earlier. This raises questions of transmission, contact, and influences between cultures. When do we actually see these traces of Egyptian influence in terms of the Egyptian historical chronology? Can they be equated to the

Egyptian outreach to the central Levant known from texts of the early to mid-12th Dynasty? To answer these questions a sound interlocked absolute chronology encompassing historical events and archaeological phases is a basic requirement.

Another case that highlights the importance of both historical and relative archeological chronologies is the late Middle Kingdom Egyptian Execration Texts.¹⁸ Whether the Levantine entities mentioned in these magical texts really refer to contemporary sites in the Middle Bronze Age southern Levant has been discussed by scholars for decades, with no clear resolution. In recent years, based on chronological reasons, Amnon Ben-Tor argued that the Execration Texts cannot refer to contemporary settlements in the Middle Bronze Age Levant, but instead recall a memory of the Early Bronze Age.¹⁹ However, a high Middle Bronze Age chronology, as suggested by radiocarbon dating, in fact would allow the Execration Texts to reflect contemporary settlements of Middle Bronze II southern Levant.²⁰

But understanding the bigger history of Egyptian–Levantine relations does not rely only on textual sources. The lack of a comprehensive study of the Middle Bronze Age and its external relations, as noted above, is also one of the reasons why so far there is no concise catalogue of Egyptian imports found in archaeological contexts of the Middle Bronze Age southern Levant.²¹ Most of the material known is published in dispersed articles, so far without any attempt for a more in-depth synthesis. Egyptian imported pottery is known from sites such as Ashkelon,²² Tel Ifshar,²³ or Sidon,²⁴ but it is most likely that additional imports will be recognized in the future. Egyptian sealings (e.g., Ashkelon) and scarabs, and local Palestinian imitations, have long been studied in great detail²⁵ but need to be reassessed in light of changing chronologies.²⁶ An astounding abundance of stone vessels that are ascribed to Egyptian production are known from many sites and need to be reviewed from a chronological point of view.²⁷ The information regarding Egyptian–Levantine relationships potentially to be derived from this variety of material culture, therefore, is lost without a solid chronological framework in which to ground these materials, as well as an established chronology for the strata and sites where they are found.

Currently, there are many more open questions than reliable answers in Middle Bronze Age archaeology, and a concise absolute chronology for

historical events and archaeological phases is a necessary prerequisite to address them. The establishment of a chronological framework encompassing the ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean will allow for new insights into Middle Bronze Age archaeology and its relations with Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the eastern Mediterranean. It is hoped that the papers assembled in this volume are a first step towards a renewed study of historical trajectories and connections during the “dawn of internationalism.”

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- ¹ See Höflmayer, this volume, for a summary and Cohen, this volume, for initial implications.
- ² Cf., e.g., B. Mazar, “The Middle Bronze Age in Palestine,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 18 (1968): 65–97; William G. Dever, “The Middle Bronze Age: The Zenith of the Urban Canaanite Era,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 50 (1987): 148–177; Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Aharon Kempinski, “The Middle Bronze Age,” in Amnon Ben-Tor (ed.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 159–210; Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); David Ilan, “The Dawn of Internationalism—The Middle Bronze Age,” in Thomas E. Levy (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 297–319; William G. Dever, “Settlement Patterns and Chronology of Palestine in the Middle Bronze Age,” in Eliezer D. Oren (ed.), *New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives, The Hyksos* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1997), 285–301; Aaron A. Burke, “Introduction to the Levant during the Middle Bronze Age,” in Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant, c. 8000–332 BCE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 403–413; Stephen J. Bourke, “The Southern Levant (Transjordan) during the Middle Bronze Age,” in Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant, c. 8000–332 BCE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 465–481; Susan L. Cohen, “The Southern Levant (Cisjordan) during the Middle Bronze Age,” in Margreet L.

- Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant, c. 8000–332 BCE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 451–464.
- ³ Ezra S. Marcus, *Tel Nami: A Study of a Middle Bronze Age IIA Period Coastal Settlement* (Haifa, 1991); Manfred Bietak (ed.), *The Middle Bronze Age in the Levant: Proceedings of an International Conference on MB IIA Ceramic Material* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002); Susan L. Cohen, *Canaanites, Chronologies, and Connections: The Relationship of Middle Bronze IIA Canaan to Middle Kingdom Egypt* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002); Ezra S. Marcus, “The Southern Levant and Maritime Trade during the Middle Bronze IIA Period,” in Shmuel Ahituv and Eliezer D. Oren (eds.), *Studies in Archaeology and Related Disciplines, Aharon Kempinski Memorial Volume* (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2002), 241–263; Ezra S. Marcus, Yosef Porath, and Samuel M. Paley, “The Early Middle Bronze Age IIA Phases at Tel Ifshar and Their External Relations,” *Ägypten & Levante* 18 (2008): 221–244; Susan L. Cohen, “Cores, Peripheries, and Ports of Power: Theories of Canaanite Development in the Early Second Millennium B.C.E.,” in J. David Schloen (ed.), *Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager, Exploring the Longue Durée* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 69–75; Susan L. Cohen, “Synchronisms and Significance: Reevaluating Interconnections between Middle Kingdom Egypt and the Southern Levant,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 4 (2012): 1–8.
- ⁴ For a notable exception, see: Aharon Kempinski, *Syrien und Palästina (Kanaan) in der letzten Phase der Mittelbronze IIB-Zeit (1650–1570 v. Chr.)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983).
- ⁵ Aren M. Maeir, *In the Midst of the Jordan: The Jordan Valley during the Middle Bronze Age (circa 2000–1500 BCE)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010).
- ⁶ Edwin C. M. van den Brink and Thomas E. Levy (eds.), *Egypt and the Levant: Interrelations from the 4th through Early 3rd Millennium B.C.E.* (London, New York: Leicester University Press, 2002).
- ⁷ Karin N. Sowada, *Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Old Kingdom: An*

- Archaeological Perspective* (Fribourg, Göttingen: Academic Press; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).
- ⁸ As an overview, cf. Felix Höflmayer, “Carbone-14 Comparé: Middle Bronze Age I (IIA) Chronology, Tell el-Dab‘a and Radiocarbon Data,” in Jana Mynářová, Pavel Onderka, and Peter Pavúk (eds.), *Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Prague, September 15–18, 2014, There and Back Again—The Crossroads II* (Prague: Charles University in Prague, 2015), 265–295.
- ⁹ Erik Hornung, Rolf K. Krauss, and David A. Warburton (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Chronology* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
- ¹⁰ Ilan Sharon, “Levantine Chronology,” in Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant, c. 8000–332 BCE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44–65.
- ¹¹ J. R. Arnold and Willard F. Libby, “Age Determinations by Radiocarbon Content: Checks with Samples of Known Age,” *Science* 110 (1949): 678–680; Royal E. Taylor and O. Bar-Yosef, *Radiocarbon Dating: An Archaeological Perspective* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014).
- ¹² Ilan 1995.
- ¹³ Ezra S. Marcus, “Amenemhet II and the Sea: Maritime Aspects of the Mit Rahina (Memphis) Inscription,” *Ägypten & Levante* 17 (2007): 135–190; Hartwig Altenmüller, *Zwei Annalenfragmente aus dem frühen Mittleren Reich* (Hamburg: Buske, 2015).
- ¹⁴ Marcus 2007, 176.
- ¹⁵ James P. Allen, “The Historical Inscription of Khnumhotep at Dahshur: Preliminary Report,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 352 (2008): 29–39.
- ¹⁶ Allen 2008, 37.
- ¹⁷ Hélène Sader and Jens Kamlah, “Tell el-Burak: A New Middle Bronze Age Site from Lebanon,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 73 (2010): 130–141; Jens Kamlah and Hélène Sader (eds.), *Tell el-Burak I: The Middle Bronze Age. With Chapters Related to the Site and to the Late Medieval Period* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, in press).
- ¹⁸ Kurt Sethe, *Die Ächtung feindlicher Fürsten, Völker und Dinge auf altägyptischen Tongefäßscherben des Mittleren Reiches* (Berlin: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1926); Georges Posener and Baudouin van de Walle, *Princes et pays d’Asie et de Nubie: Textes hiéroglyphiques sur des figurines d’envoutement du Moyen Empire; suivis de remarques paléographiques sur les textes similaires de Berlin* (Bruxelles: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1940).
- ¹⁹ Amnon Ben-Tor, “Do the Excretion Texts Reflect an Accurate Picture of the Contemporary Settlement Map of Palestine?” in Yairah Amit, Ehud Ben Zvi, Israel Finkelstein, and Oded Lipschits (eds.), *A Tribute to Nadav Na’aman, Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 63–87.
- ²⁰ See Streit, this volume.
- ²¹ But see now: Anna-Latifa Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early Second Intermediate Period* (Oakville: David Brown Book, 2015).
- ²² Lawrence E. Stager and Ross Voss, “Egyptian Pottery in Middle Bronze Age Ashkelon,” *Eretz Israel* 30 (2011): 119*–126*.
- ²³ Ezra S. Marcus, Yosef Porath, Robert Schiestl, Anne Seiler, and Samuel M. Paley, “The Middle Kingdom Egyptian Pottery from Middle Bronze Age IIA Tel Ifshar,” *Ägypten & Levante* 18 (2008): 203–219.
- ²⁴ Irene Forstner-Müller, Karin Kopetzky and Claude Doumet-Serhal, “Egyptian Pottery of the Late 12th and 13th Dynasty from Sidon,” *Archaeology and History in the Lebanon* 24 (2006): 52–59; Irene Forstner-Müller and Karin Kopetzky, “An Upper Egyptian Import at Sidon,” *Archaeology and History in the Lebanon* 24 (2006): 60–62; Bettina Bader, Irene Forstner-Müller, Karin Kopetzky, and Claude Doumet-Serhal, “An Egyptian Jar from Sidon in Its Egyptian Context: Some Fresh Evidence,” *Archaeology and History in the Lebanon* 29 (2009): 79–83.
- ²⁵ Daphna Ben-Tor, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections: Egypt and Palestine in the Second Intermediate Period* (Fribourg, Göttingen: Academic Press; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).
- ²⁶ Nadine Moeller and Grégory Marouard, “Discussion of Late Middle Kingdom and Early Second Intermediate Period History and

Chronology in Relation to the Khayan Sealings from Tell Edfu," *Ägypten & Levante* 21 (2011): 87–121; Felix Höflmayer, "An Early Date for Khayan and Its Implications for Eastern Mediterranean Chronologies," in Irene Forstner-Müller and Nadine Moeller (eds.), *The Hyksos Ruler Khayan and the Early Second Intermediate Period in Egypt: Problems and Priorities of Current Research*

(Vienna, in press); and in general: Irene Forstner-Müller and Nadine Moeller (eds.), *The Hyksos Ruler Khayan and the Early Second Intermediate Period in Egypt: Problems and Priorities of Current Research* (Vienna, in press).

²⁷ Rachael T. Sparks, *Stone Vessels in the Levant* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2007).