



THE ABSOLUTE CHRONOLOGY OF THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE PALACE AT TEL KABRI: IMPLICATIONS FOR AEGEAN-STYLE WALL PAINTINGS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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ABSTRACT

A recent set of radiocarbon dates, run by the Oxford laboratory, has returned results considerably higher than expected for several phases of the Middle Bronze Age Canaanite palace at Tel Kabri. The samples suggest a date that is at least a century earlier than expected, which would indicate that miniature frescoes were being painted at Kabri well before their appearance at Santorini. The dates also bring back into play a possible narrative of an artistic influence that traveled from east to west, rather than the opposite, just as Woolley originally suggested when excavating at Alalakh. However, the situation could conceivably also be much more complex and not nearly as linear in one direction or the other. Moreover, it remains to be seen if the radiocarbon dates are accurate; we will be retrieving more samples and dating them in coming seasons.

INTRODUCTION

The wall and floor paintings of the Middle Bronze Age Canaanite palace of Tel Kabri, first found during excavations from 1986–1993 by Aharon Kempinski and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, with more found recently by the present authors since 2009, belong to a small group of Aegean-inspired palatial art in the eastern Mediterranean. Other examples include Middle Bronze Age paintings from Alalakh in Turkey, and the Late Bronze Age examples from Tell el-Dabʿa in Egypt and Qatna in Syria.

The date of these Aegean-inspired wall and floor paintings at Tel Kabri, located in the western Galilee region of modern Israel, not only has implications for the understanding of the artistic connections between east and west but also provides another chronological anchor regarding the use of the miniature fresco style, which is found in Late Minoan IA and later contexts in the Aegean, but not

in earlier, Middle Minoan III contexts.¹

The Kabri wall paintings all belong to the penultimate phase of the palace, Phase DW IV, while the floor in Hall 611 was used also in the latest phase, Phase DW III. Ceramic typology, both local and imported, suggests that both DW III and DW IV should be associated with the Middle Bronze II period. In addition, a set of radiocarbon dates for Phases DW IV and the later DW III now provides a framework for the absolute chronology of the last two phases of the palace.

REVISED HYPOTHESES

The previous excavators at Kabri attributed the wall and floor paintings to the last phase of the palace, i.e., Kempinski Stratum 3c (= renewed excavation Phase DW III). However, our renewed excavations have now shown that all of the wall painting fragments were deposited in secondary contexts

during a major renovation phase preceding DW III, thus belonging to Phase DW IV.² In terms of relative chronology, based on local pottery as well as on imported Cypriot pottery, Phase DW III and the habitation of the palace ended before the end of the Middle Bronze II period in Canaan, while Phase DW IV also belonged to the Middle Bronze II period, but to a slightly earlier stage.

In our previous publications, we therefore tentatively assigned the destruction of the palace to the early 16th century BCE, and the use of the wall paintings to a slightly earlier date, at the end of the 17th century BCE.³ Kempinski and the Niemeiers had also suggested a very late 17th century BCE for the paintings,⁴ while Bietak wished to date them to the middle-late 16th century BCE.⁵

Although at that point not yet supported by radiocarbon dates, an assignation of the Kabri Aegean-style wall paintings to the late 17th century BCE also seemed to us to work better with the suggested Aegean higher chronology of Late Minoan IA, rather than with the lower chronology.⁶ In large part, this is because using the lower chronology would have meant that, in terms of absolute chronology, the Kabri wall paintings were painted in the Middle Minoan III period, before the widespread adoption of figurative painting in Crete.⁷

However, we have recently received a set of radiocarbon dates, run by the Oxford laboratory, which has surprised us with results considerably higher than expected.⁸ Eleven samples from Phase DW III set the end date for this phase, and for the palace as a whole, between 1742–1640 BCE, which is a century or more earlier than expected. Only four samples were taken from Phase DW IV, yet these all had a range ending at the very beginning of the 17th century BCE, thus indicating that the transition between Phase IV and III (and the deposition of the wall paintings) occurs between 1743–1695 BCE, i.e. most likely in the late 18th century BCE—rather than the late 17th century BCE as we previously believed—and that the palace itself comes to an end in the early 17th century BCE.⁹

If the absolute high radiocarbon dates stand, this would affect the relative dating of the Aegean-style paintings at Alalakh, Qatna, Kabri, and Dab^ʿa. It would mean that ours at Kabri are the earliest, followed by those in Alalakh VII, and then the paintings at Dab^ʿa, followed later by those at Qatna.¹⁰ We can also put all of these into a slightly larger Eastern Mediterranean context, by saying that the wall paintings at Tell el-Burak in Lebanon are

probably the earliest in this relative sequence, dating to the 19th century BCE; then those at Mari, ours at Kabri, and those at Tell Sakka in Syria come next, dating to the 18th century BCE; followed by Alalakh and then Akrotiri in the 17th century BCE.¹¹

These dates potentially have considerable bearing on a variety of other topics as well, including the chronology of the appearance of Cypriot pottery in the Levant, which may in turn also shed light on some of the many challenges in the chronology of the Middle Cypriot III period, including whether such a phase exists as a separate entity.¹² Thus, for example, Cypriot Red-on-Red bowls, whose beginning of production is during Middle Cypriot III, make their first appearance in Phase DW V at Tel Kabri, with the relative chronology of transitional Middle Bronze I/II.¹³ Note, however, that only one radiocarbon sample was available from this phase, which had a very wide range between the early 19th century to the beginning of the 17th century BCE. Further examples of this ware appear in DW IV contexts.

In addition, the very rich Cypriot assemblage of many dozens of sherds and vessels of Kempinski Stratum 3 and the renewed excavations of Phase DW III did not include a single Red-on-Red sherd. However, this phase yielded types commonly connected with late Middle Cypriot III, while not yielding any clear Late Cypriot I types, such as Proto-White Slip, White Slip I, Base Ring I, or Bichrome.¹⁴ Thus a refined chronology of Phases DW III–V may well provide evidence that can be combined with Cypriot data to aid in dating the chronology of Middle Cypriot and the transition between Middle Cypriot to Late Cypriot.

An even greater potential impact of these new radiocarbon dates, if they are correct, is that they suggest that miniature frescoes, identified by Niemeier and Niemeier as similar to those on Thera, were indeed painted and in use at Kabri well before their appearance in the Aegean, for miniature frescoes come usually from Late Minoan IA or Late Cycladic I contexts in Crete, Kea, and Santorini (though some would argue that the Knossian “Sacred Grove and Dance” fresco, and perhaps the “Saffron Gatherer” fresco as well, may date earlier).¹⁵ As stated above, we already felt that the Kabri material worked better with the Aegean high chronology,¹⁶ and indeed the new possible dating of the Kabri frescoes continues to fit the high chronology of the Thera eruption. Now, however, without unduly involving a circular argument, it

appears that the frescoes may also actually support such a chronology, as one of the few available material correlations.

What is also beyond question is the similarity of such paintings in both the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. As the Niemeiers have noted, "...the style and the iconography of the Alalakh, Tel el Dab'a and Kabri frescoes are consistent with those of genuine Aegean fresco paintings..."¹⁷ However, an earlier date for the Kabri frescoes may support a narrative of an artistic influence from east to west, rather than the opposite. Interestingly, this is exactly what Woolley originally suggested when excavating the palace at Alalakh, which also has Aegean-style frescoes.¹⁸ As he wrote, the paintings at Alalakh "constitute unmistakable evidence for the influence exercised by western Asia on the development of Crete."¹⁹

It is also conceivable that the experimentation may have been taking place on both sides, in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, at approximately the same time. As Koehl has suggested, "perhaps at Tel Kabri, we might again detect the relatively untried hands of Aegean craftsmen working in the Levant, offering their assistance, and experimenting on the spot with images and styles that were only just beginning to take hold in the Aegean."²⁰

We must therefore now revive the question, and discussions, of which direction(s) the artists and these images and painting techniques were going. However, it is quite likely that the situation was much more complex than previously imagined and not nearly as linear as Woolley or others have suggested, in either direction, for the 18th century BCE was a time of contacts between Crete and the ancient Near East, with textual evidence from Mari recording Minoans and Minoan goods at sites ranging from Ugarit to Babylon, and both Egyptian and Near Eastern goods found on Crete.²¹ This was also a great age of international artistic experimentation, which seems to have included interaction between Aegean, Levantine, and Egyptian artisans.

Thus, while the new radiocarbon dates from Tel Kabri are of great interest, and with potential ripple effects across both the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, they generate more questions than they answer. Moreover, it remains to be seen if the radiocarbon dates are accurate; we will be retrieving more samples and dating them in coming seasons, to see if we can corroborate these rather surprising results.

¹ Barbara Niemeier and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, "The Frescoes in the Middle Bronze Age Palace," in Aharon Kempinski (ed.), *The 1986–1993 Excavation Seasons, Tel Kabri* (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2002), 254–285; Manfred Bietak, "Bronze Age Paintings in the Levant: Chronological and Cultural Considerations," in Manfred Bietak and Ernst Czerny (eds.), *The Synchronisation of Civilisations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C. III. Proceedings of the SCIEM 2000—2nd EuroConference, Vienna 28th of May–1st of June 2003* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 269–300; Eric H. Cline, Assaf Yasur-Landau, and Nurith Goshen, "New Fragments of Aegean-Style Painted Plaster from Tel Kabri, Israel," *American Journal of Archaeology* 115 (2011): 245–261.

² See, e.g., Cline et al. 2011, 255–256.

³ Cline et al. 2011; Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric H. Cline, and Nurith Goshen, "Initial Results of the Stratigraphy and Chronology of the Tel Kabri Middle Bronze Age Palace," *Ägypten & Levante* 24 (2014): 355–364; Inbal Samet, "The Chrono-Typological Pottery Sequence from the Middle Bronze Age Palace at Kabri: Some Preliminary Results," *Ägypten & Levante* 24 (2014): 365–395; Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric H. Cline, Andrew J. Koh, David Ben-Shlomo, Nimrod Marom, Alexandra Ratzlaff, and Inbal Samet, "Rethinking Canaanite Palaces?: The Palatial Economy of Tel Kabri during the Middle Bronze Age," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 40 (2015): 607–625.

⁴ Aharon Kempinski (ed.), *Tel Kabri: The 1986–1993 Excavation Seasons* (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2002); Niemeier and Niemeier 2002.

⁵ Bietak 2007; Manfred Bietak, "Antagonisms in Historical and Radiocarbon Chronology," in Andrew J. Shortland and Christopher Bronk Ramsey (eds.), *Radiocarbon and the Chronologies of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 76–109.

⁶ E.g., Sturt W. Manning and Christopher Bronk Ramsey, "The Dating of the Earlier Late Minoan IA Period: A Brief Note," in David A. Warburton (ed.), *Time's Up! Dating the Minoan Eruption of*

- Santorini. Acts of the Minoan Eruption Chronology Workshop, Sandbjerg November 2007 Initiated by Jan Heinemeier & Walter L. Friedrich* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009), 227–245; Peter M. Warren, “The Date of the Late Bronze Age Eruption of Santorini,” in David A. Warburton (ed.), *Time’s Up! Dating the Minoan Eruption of Santorini. Acts of the Minoan Eruption Chronology Workshop, Sandbjerg November 2007 Initiated by Jan Heinemeier & Walter L. Friedrich* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009), 181–186.
- ⁷ Apart from some early examples at a few sites like Galatas, Knossos, and Phaistos, see G. Rethemiotakis, “Evidence of Social and Economic Changes at Galatas and Pediada in the New Palace Period,” in Jan Driessen, Ilse Schoep and Robert Laffineur (eds.), *Monuments of Minos: Rethinking the Minoan Palaces. Proceedings of the International Workshop “Crete of the Hundred Palaces?” Held at the Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, 14–15 December 2001* (Liège: Université de Liège, 2002), 55–69; Cline et al. 2011, 257; Robert B. Koehl, “The Near Eastern Contribution to Aegean Wall Painting and Vice Versa,” in Joan Aruz, Sarah B. Graff and Yelena Rakic (eds.), *Cultures in Contact. From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C.* (New York, New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2013), 170–179; P. Militello, “Wall-painting and Vase-painting: the case of MM III Phaistos,” in A. Vlachopoulos (ed.), *Paintbrushes. Wall-painting and Vase-painting of the 2nd Millennium BC in Dialogue* (Athens: Society for the Promotion of Thera Studies, 2013), 46–51; Philip P. Betancourt, “Evidence from Pottery for the Early Stages of Monumental Cretan Wall-paintings,” in A. Vlachopoulos (ed.), *Paintbrushes. Wall-painting and Vase-painting of the 2nd Millennium BC in Dialogue* (Athens: Society for the Promotion of Thera Studies, 2013), 40–45.
- ⁸ Felix Höflmayer, Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric H. Cline, Michael W. Dee, Brita Lorentzen, and Simone Riehl, “New Radiocarbon Dates from Tel Kabri Support a High Middle Bronze Age Chronology,” *Radiocarbon* 58 (2016a), 599–613.
- ⁹ Höflmayer et al. 2016a, 13.
- ¹⁰ Bietak 2013; Yasur-Landau et al. 2014; Yasur-Landau et al. 2015.
- ¹¹ 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.), *There and Back Again—The Crossroads II. Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Prague, September 15–18, 2014* (Prague: Charles University in Prague, 2015), 265–295; Sturt W. Manning, Carol B. Griggs, Brita Lorentzen, Gojko Barjamovic, Christopher Bronk Ramsey, Bernd Kromer, and Eva M. Wild, “Integrated Tree-Ring-Radiocarbon High-Resolution Timeframe to Resolve Earlier Second Millennium BC Mesopotamian Chronology,” *PLOS One* 11 (2016), <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0157144>; Yasur-Landau et al. 2015; Felix Höflmayer, Jens Kamlah, Hélène Sader, Michael W. Dee, Walter Kutschera, Eva M. Wild, and Simone Riehl, “New Evidence for Middle Bronze Age Chronology and Synchronisms in the Levant: Radiocarbon Dates from Tell el-Burak, Tell el-Dab‘a, and Tel Ifshar Compared,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 375 (2016b): 53–76; Höflmayer et al. 2016a.
- ¹² E.g., Sturt W. Manning, “A Radiocarbon-Based Chronology for the Chalcolithic through Middle Bronze Age of Cyprus (as of AD 2012),” in Felix Höflmayer and Ricardo Eichmann (eds.), *Egypt and the Southern Levant during the Early Bronze Age* (Rahden: Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH, 2014), 207–240.
- ¹³ Samet 2014, fig. 11.
- ¹⁴ Louise C. Maguire, *Tell el-Dab‘a XXI: The Cypriot Pottery and its Circulation in the Levant* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009); Aharon Kempinski, Lilly Gershuny, and Na‘ama Scheffelowitz, “Pottery: III. Middle Bronze Age,” in Aharon Kempinski (ed.), *The 1986–1993 Excavation Seasons, Tel Kabri* (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2002), 109–175.
- ¹⁵ Sara A. Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age* (University Park, London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 170, 173 [Kn Nos. 1, 16]; Cline et al. 2011, 257.
- ¹⁶ Cline et al. 2011, 256–257.
- ¹⁷ Niemeier and Niemeier 2002, 281.

- ¹⁸ C. Leonard Woolley, *Alalakh: An Account of the Excavations at Tell Atchana in the Hatay, 1937–1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 92–94, 228–232; also quoted in Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, “Minoan Artists Travelling Overseas: The Alalakh Frescoes and the Painted Plaster Floors at Tel Kabri (Western Galilee),” in Robert Laffineur and L. Basch (eds.), *Thalassa: L’Égée préhistorique et la mer* (Liège: Université de Liège, 1991), 189–201; see also: C. Leonard Woolley, *A Forgotten Kingdom: Being a Record of the Results Obtained from the Excavation of Two Mounds, Atchana and al Mina, in the Turkish Hatay* (London: Penguin Books, 1953), 75–77.
- ¹⁹ Woolley 1955, 228.
- ²⁰ Koehl 2013, 177.
- ²¹ Eric H. Cline, *Sailing the Wine Dark Sea: International Trade and the Late Bronze Age Aegean* (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1994) with references.