



Review

Karin N. Sowada

with a contribution by Peter Grave

EGYPT IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN DURING THE OLD KINGDOM: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht Göttingen (2009)

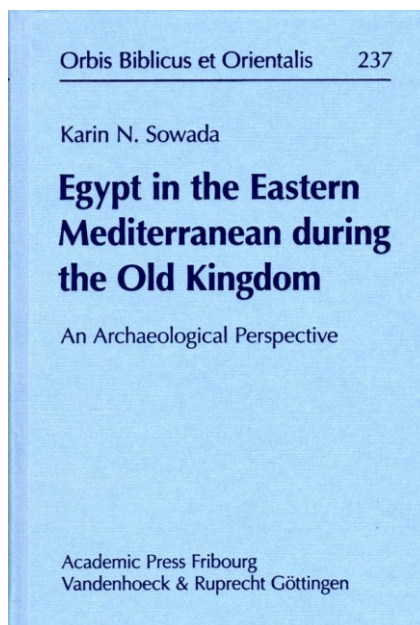
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Abstract

Karin Sowada's Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Old Kingdom: An Archaeological Perspective, published in 2009, is an extended version of the author's doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Sydney in 2002. Sowada undertook the laborious task of presenting Egypt's contacts with the Eastern Mediterranean which during the period in question, the Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3-6 – Early Bronze III-IV), included the southern Levant (Israel, Palestine, and Jordan) and the northern Levant (Syria and Lebanon), as well as Crete. As written sources for this period have been studied relatively well, the author opted for an analysis of the hitherto some-what neglected archaeological material. In the eight chapters of her book Sowada has catalogued and discussed Egyptian material found in the East as well as Eastern material discovered in Egypt. She ends with a chapter summing up the nature of Egypt's relations with its Eastern neighbors.

Karin Sowada's long awaited book presents Egypt's contacts with its Eastern neighbors during the Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3-6), equivalent to the Early Bronze III-IV. The first chapter, which describes the territorial scope of the study and the adopted research methodology, discusses current scholarly knowledge of these relations and Egypt's role in the goods exchanged with the East based on available archaeological data, including written texts.

The arrangement of the book is logical. Particular objects have been numbered in the text and on the plates to assist readers in following Sowada's argument. One of the few errors noted in the texts concerns the publication of the pottery from the solar temple of Userkaf in Abu Gurab,¹ pp. 80-81.



The author refers to pottery found in the funerary complex of Userkaf in Saqqara, but it is known that such a study was never written. It seems obvious that Sowada simply mistook the funerary complex of the king for the published solar temple of Userkaf. The two complexes are situated in different parts of the Memphite necropolis.

A great virtue of this book is not only a presentation of material from the Old Kingdom, but also the discussion of bilateral relations between Egypt and the Levant/Canaan in the preceding period, that is, the fourth and the beginning of the third millennium BC (see chapter 2). A critical appraisal of the evidence for Egypt's international relations constitutes a good background for a discussion of potential changes in the character of mutual contacts

between neighboring lands in later times.

In the following chapters the author lists goods that were the object of commercial exchange: those of Eastern provenance found in Egypt (chapter 3) and Egyptian ones discovered respectively in the southern and northern Levant (chapter 4). Egyptian imports found in the Near East included: ceramics, minor objects made of stone, mace heads, shells, stone vessels, faience and carnelian beads, stone palettes, and cylindrical seals. Architectural borrowings were also a specific Egyptian import, primarily at Tel Yarmuth where the Egyptian cubit measure was adopted as a key unit. A cornice with uraci found in Byblos finds a counterpart in the funerary complex of Netjerykhet in Saqqara. At the other end, objects from the Near East in Egypt testified to the status and wealth of their new owners. The Egyptians valued coniferous wood, such as fir, pine, juniper, yew, and the most renowned, cedar wood. Cedar beams were brought to Egypt by sea, in seafaring boats sailing most probably from Byblos. Ship cargoes also included ceramic jugs containing other valuable products, like olive oil, wine, and coniferous resin. Sowada adds that silver could also have been a coveted commodity in Egypt. Ebla, in Syria, may have sent lapis lazuli. Copper was extracted in southern Canaan and there is a growing body of evidence to demonstrate that Egyptian metal objects from the Old Kingdom need not have been made only of copper from the Sinai or the Eastern Desert. Metal from Wadi Feinan in modern-day Jordan appears to have been used as well. Sowada also emphasizes the possibility of wild animals being brought to Egypt, for example, Syrian bears known from representations in the funerary complex of king Sahure at Abusir. Neither should the transport of people, primarily war captives, be excluded.

Chapter six is devoted to a critical analysis of Eastern combed ware jars known from the territory of Egypt. Sowada includes an interpretation of the results of an elemental analyses of the clay from some of these vessels (see Peter Grave and Karin Sowada – appendix II). The limited number of examined vessels from Egypt is a pity: seven from Giza and one from Matmar. The analysis has shown that the examined jars came from Byblos and its vicinity or the central Levant. Sowada admits the urgent need for further extensive studies of this type.

In the next chapters the author gives a detailed, critical analysis of the occurrence of specific objects in Egypt and the Near East. She considers in each case the original provenience of the objects, rightly assuming possible errors in the identification of manufacturing places in the original publications. In many cases, authors express deeply rooted beliefs, as for example with regard to objects made of carnelian and faience, which have always been assumed to come from Egypt. Sowada proves, however, that some of them could have been made of local material in the Near East and as such should not be included among the internationally traded objects.

Sowada should be commended for collecting such a huge quantity of published finds in one book and presenting it in a well-considered catalogue with descriptions and her critical remarks. She has made the effort to personally examine most of the finds and readily admits instances when she was unable to reach the object herself. This builds her credibility for which even small errors in the citing of some publications cannot change. Hers is a fully objective view of the material which she has seen for herself and can formulate her own opinions, including objects previously not considered in the context of international relations. Pointing out her inability to carry out all the examinations necessary to indicate the provenance of given objects, she gives suggestions regarding future research. With regard to the relations of Egypt and the Near East, she has emphasized issues that need to be reconsidered and in some cases have never before been undertaken. In the latter case, she has in mind primarily full-scale specialist research that will determine, if possible, the origin of objects considered as imports.

Sowada also points to the great importance of Byblos in the mutual contacts of Egypt and the Near East. This center is known to have been a port and could have been the spot from where goods from the northern Levant issued on their way to Egypt. But the products found in Egypt need not have come from Byblos itself. Recent research in Lebanon has identified more sites with layers from the Early Bronze III, including Tell Arqa,² Fadous Kfarabida,³ Beirut,⁴ and Sidon.⁵ Petrographic analyses of the pottery have also been made. Unfortunately, there is still insufficient material from pottery kilns for comparative studies with vessels from Egypt. Based on the geology of Lebanon, it is possible at least to give an approximate localization of the source material.⁶

The most important part of the book is, expectedly, the 11-page conclusions in which Sowada describes the nature of the contacts between Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean and the transformations that took place in this sphere. Bilateral relations underwent a change at the beginning of the Early Bronze II, during the Archaic period in Egypt, most probably in the reign of Djer. No longer was it a lord—subject relation, but one of equal trading partners. Valuable objects could also have been exchanged as gifts. This is particularly true of stone vessels which were prized even without their contents. Trade routes changed with the need for new products, primarily wood and coniferous resin from present-day Lebanon. The inconvenient land route across Sinai was abandoned in favor of sea transport until perhaps the middle of the 5th Dynasty when the demand for copper from Wadi Feinan in southern Canaan grew again in Egypt. The presence of imported jars in Egypt is connected with the internal situation. At first, they were concentrated in the royal necropolis of the 4th Dynasty. Later, in the 5th-6th Dynasty, the jars reached also local officials and places in Upper Egypt distant from the central seats

of power. With regard to Crete, it seems that Egypt of the Old Kingdom did not maintain any direct contacts with the island. Egyptian goods may have reached Crete via the Near Eastern towns.

Many objects imported to Egypt, primarily ceramic vessels still mostly awaiting publication, have been found in recent years. These vessels come from different regions of Egypt and are dated to the Predynastic-Archaic Old Kingdom period. Four new fragments of vessels from the 5th and 6th Dynasties have been found on Elephantine.⁷ At the most recent conference devoted to contacts between Egypt and the Near East (Egypt and the Near East – the Crossroads. International Workshop on the Relations between Egypt and the Near East in the Bronze Age, Prague, September 1–3, 2010) new material was presented coming from Tell el Farkha (Marcin Czarnowicz), Helwan (E. Christiana Köhler), Giza (Anna Wodzińska and Mary F. Ownby), Saqqara (Teodozja Rzeuska) and Abydos (Christian Knoblauch). Of particular interest is a large set of combed ware jars discovered in the 6th Dynasty tombs in Abydos. Their unexpected and previously unconfirmed presence on this site demonstrates the possibility for many more imported vessels of Eastern provenance being found. They could change our views of the internal politics

of Egypt, especially at the close of the 6th Dynasty. The question remains how many of these vessels actually came from outside Egypt and how many were made on the spot. This is the issue of Egyptian imitations of foreign forms during the 5th and 6th Dynasties. Research on imports and imitations has gained in popularity in recent years.

Karin Sowada has written an extraordinarily important book on the international relations of Egypt, collecting for the first time all the available evidence of Egypt's contacts with its Eastern neighbors. Added value is that the author has conscientiously made an effort, largely successful, to personally examine the objects which she discusses. A few important studies on the topic have been published since the publication of her book, but they do not detract from the importance of Sowada's presentation. On the other hand, she readily admits that much still waits to be done, the most important issue being full-scale specialist analyses that could supply the largest set of data on the possible provenance of objects found in Egypt as well as outside its borders. New publications, especially those containing the results of specialist studies of pottery from the Early Bronze III from the Levant, should provide good grounds for comparative research on Eastern Mediterranean ceramics found in Egypt.

Notes

¹ Werner Kaiser, "Die Tongefässe," in Herbert Ricke (ed.), *Das Sonnenheiligtum des Königs Userkaf II. Beiträge zur Ägyptischen Bauforschung und Altertumskunde* (Kairo: Schweizerisches Institut für Ägyptische Bauforschung und Altertumskunde, 1969), 49-82.

² Jean-Paul Thalmann, "Tell Arqa," *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises* 4 (2000), 5-74.

³ Kamal Badreshany, Hermann Genz, and Hélène Sader, "An Early Bronze Age Site on the Lebanese Coast. Tell Fadous-Kfarabida 2004 and 2005. Final Report," *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises* 9 (2005), 5-115; Kamal Badreshany and Hermann Genz "Pottery Production on the Northern Lebanese Coast During the Early Bronze Age II-III: The Petrographic Analysis of the Ceramics from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 355 (2009), 51-83.

⁴ Leila Badre, "Bey 003 Preliminary Report. Excavations of the American University of Beirut Museum 1993-1996," *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises* 2 (1997), 6-94.

⁵ Claude Doumet-Serhal, *The Early Bronze Age in Sidon: "College Site" Excavations (1998-2000-2001)*, *Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique* (Beyrouth: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2006).

⁶ Mary Ownby and Dafydd Griffiths, "The Petrographic Analysis of Beach Sand from Sidon to Determine Its Utility for Ceramic Provenance Studies," *Archaeology and History in Lebanon* 29 (2009), 56-67.

⁷ Irene Forstner-Müller and Dietrich Raue, "Elephantine and the Levant," in Eva-Maria Engel, Vera Müller, and Ulrich Hartung (eds.), *Zeichen aus dem Sand: Streiflichter aus Ägyptens Geschichte Zu Ehren von Günter Dreyer* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 127-148.