

HISTORY OF EGYPT IN PALESTINE

تاريخ مصر في فلسطين

*Susan Cohen*

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## HISTORY OF EGYPT IN PALESTINE

### تاريخ مصر في فلسطين

Susan Cohen

Geschichte von Ägypten in Palästina  
Histoire de l'Égypte en Palestine

*Egyptian interactions and contact with Palestine began as early as the fourth millennium BCE, and continued, in varying forms and at times far more intensively than others, until the conquest of the ancient world by Alexander the Great. Numerous data—textual, material, archaeological—found in both Egyptian and southern Levantine contexts illustrate the diverse spectrum of interaction and contact between the two regions, which ranged from colonialism, to imperial expansion, to diplomatic relations, to commerce. By virtue of geographic proximity, economic interests, and occasionally political necessity, the respective histories of the two regions remained irreducibly interconnected. In all periods, situations and events in Egypt influenced growth and development in the southern Levant, while at times different societies and political considerations in Palestine also affected Egyptian culture.*

بدأت العلاقات المصرية بفلسطين خلال بداية الألف الرابع قبل الميلاد ، واستمرت في أشكال متعددة وأوقات أحيانا متفاوتة حتى قدوم الأسكندر الأكبر وبداية فتح العالم القديم. العديد من المعلومات والبيانات – نصية ، مادية ، وأثرية – تم الكشف عنها في كلا من مصر وجنوب بلاد الشام ، والتي ألقت الضوء على مدى التنوع في العلاقات والتفاعل بين المنطقتين ، حيث تتأرجح ما بين الإستعمار ، التوسع الإمبراطوري ، العلاقات الدبلوماسية والعلاقات التجارية. لا يزال تاريخ المنطقتين مترابط ولا يمكن إختزاله ، وذلك بحكم القرب الجغرافي والمصالح الإقتصادية وفي بعض الأحيان الضرورة السياسية. أثرت الأوضاع والأحداث في مصر في جميع الفترات على النمو والتنمية في منطقة جنوب فلسطين ، بينما في أوقات أخرى أثرت أيضا مجتمعات مختلفة واعتبارات سياسية في فلسطين على الثقافة المصرية.

**A**s the relationship between ancient Egypt and the southern Levant changed over time, so too did the Egyptian terminology for Palestine vary. (The term “Palestine” is used here to refer to the southern Levant in the ancient world, which is understood to include the modern regions of the Palestinian Territories, Israel, and portions of western Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula: see fig. 1.) As a result, in Egyptian textual material it is often difficult to determine which

particular region is meant by a particular term, and whether the reference is meant to identify an entire area and all its peoples or instead a sub-region and its individual inhabitants, as, for example, in the use of the term *hrjw-š* (“sand-dwellers”) in the *Tale of Weni* (Goedicke 1963: 189; see also Redford 1986) or the mention of the “land of Yaa” in the *Tale of Sinuhe*. The exact geographic location of regions cited in

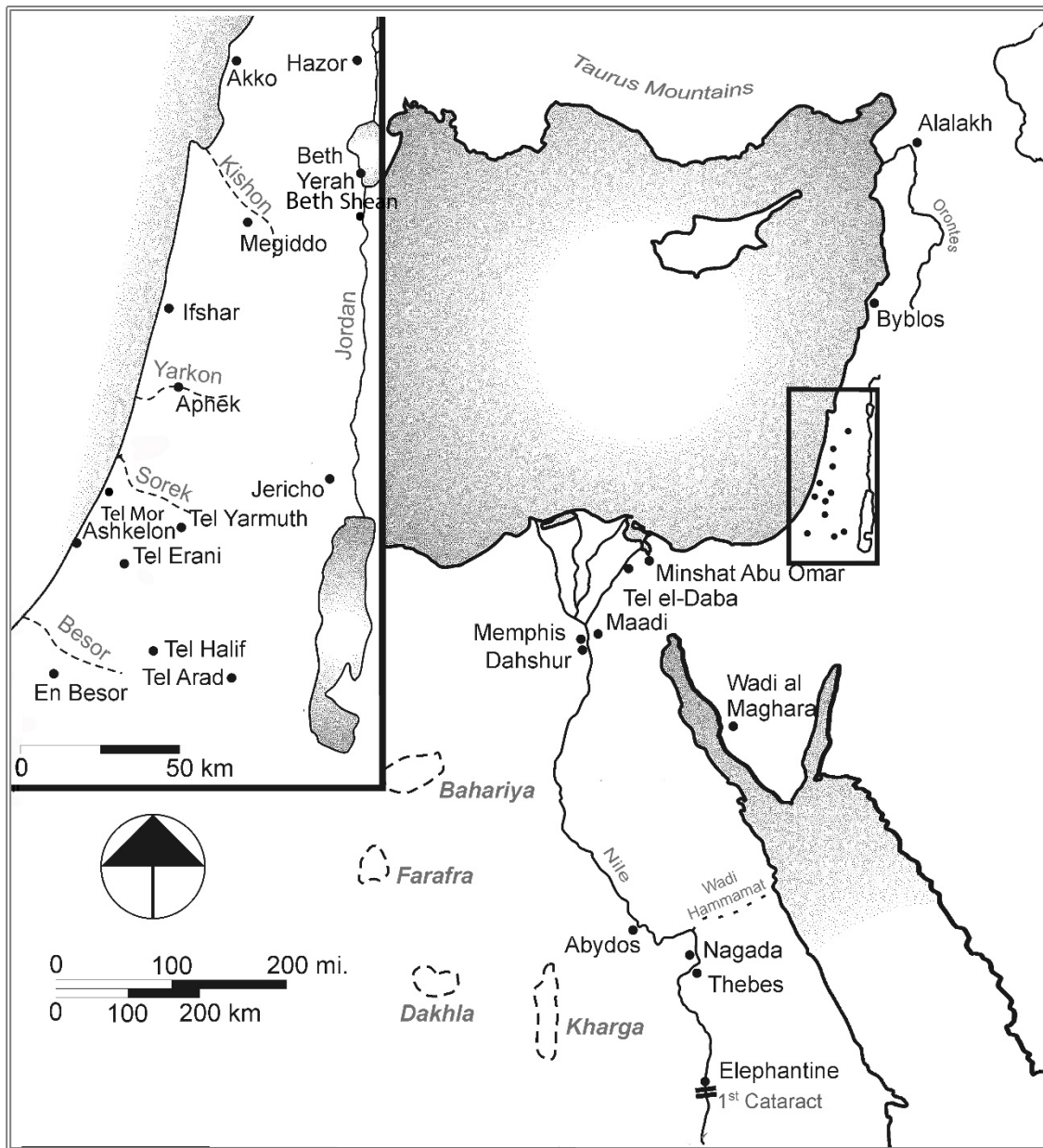


Figure 1. Map of ancient Egypt and Palestine.

Egyptian texts thus often remains uncertain; this imprecision has ramifications for understanding the relationship between Egypt and Palestine, a problem which is then further compounded by difficulties in establishing clear chronological synchronisms between the two regions, particularly in the earlier eras (Table 1).

In general, synchronisms between the Egyptian Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods and the Palestinian Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I are fairly well established. However, recent 14C analyses have resulted in significant changes in the chronological synchronisms between Old Kingdom Egypt and the Palestinian Early Bronze Age (Regev et al. 2012; Höflmayer et al. 2014). These new data clearly indicate that, rather than being

EGYPT	PALESTINE	APPROXIMATE DATES
Predynastic Badarian Naqada I Naqada II (early)	Chalcolithic – Early Bronze Age IA	4500 – 3300 BCE
Predynastic Naqada II (late), III Early Dynastic Dynasty 0	Early Bronze Age IB	3300 – 3200/2900 BCE
Early Dynastic Dynasty I Dynasty II	Early Bronze Age II – Early Bronze Age III	3200/2900 – 2650/2500 BCE
Old Kingdom Dynasty III Dynasty IV Dynasty V Dynasty VI	Intermediate Bronze Age	2650/2500 – 2160 BCE
First Intermediate Period Dynasties VII – XI	Intermediate Bronze Age	2160 – 2055 BCE
Middle Kingdom Dynasty XI Dynasty XII Dynasty XIII Dynasty XIV	Intermediate Bronze Age – Middle Bronze Age I – Middle Bronze Age II (early)	2055 – 1773/1650 BCE
Second Intermediate Period Dynasties XV - XVII	Middle Bronze Age II (late)	1650 – 1550 BCE
New Kingdom Dynasty XVIII Dynasty XIX Dynasty XX	Late Bronze Age I – Iron Age IB	1550 – 1069 BCE
Third Intermediate Period Dynasties XXI – XXV	Iron Age IB – Iron Age IIB	1069 – 664 BCE
Late Period – Persian Period Dynasties XXVI – XXX	Iron Age IIC – Babylonian destruction – Persian Period	664 – 332 BCE

Table 1. Basic chronological correlations between ancient Egypt and Palestine.

coterminous with the Palestinian Early Bronze Age III, much of the Old Kingdom was contemporary with the relatively deurbanized period of the Intermediate Bronze Age, which clearly has significant repercussions for understanding Egyptian-Palestinian interactions in the third millennium.

Likewise, the chronological synchronisms for the first half of the second millennium are

in flux. Recent studies suggest that the earliest rulers of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom were contemporary with the Palestinian Intermediate Bronze Age, whereas the Middle Bronze Age proper corresponds to the mature Middle Kingdom (starting with the reign of Amenemhat II) and later (Cohen 2012, 2016; see also Marcus, Porath, and Paley 2008; Marcus et al. 2008). Finally, recent C14 analyses also indicate that the absolute dates for the

transition to the Palestinian Late Bronze Age must be raised by almost a century from those in conventional usage (Höflmayer et al. 2016), thereby affecting understandings of the relationship between New Kingdom Egypt and the southern Levant in the Late Bronze Age.

Fortunately, relationships and chronologies become more straightforward in the latter centuries of the second millennium, and continuing into the first millennium through the beginning of the Hellenistic Period. While questions remain regarding precise dates and individual events, the general correlations between the later periods in Egypt and the Iron Age I-II and Persian periods in Palestine are relatively well established.

### *Previous Scholarship*

From the inceptions of both disciplines—Egyptology and ancient Near Eastern archaeology—in the nineteenth century, scholarship of the relationship between Egypt and the southern Levant relied heavily on the history of, and relationships between, the regions as presented in the biblical text (Díaz-Andreu 2007; Gange 2013). Likewise, early scholarship in both Egyptology and southern Levantine archaeology placed considerable emphasis on Egyptian historical sources, stemming partly from a disciplinary bias toward written text but also, and in large part, due to the relative dearth of archaeological data to support, supplement, or refute these written data. This rather uncritical approach to issues of historicity in both biblical and Egyptological texts strongly influenced views of Egyptian-Palestinian interactions well into the middle of the twentieth century, and in some cases, even later.

Only in the latter part of the twentieth century, with the separation of Syro-Palestinian archaeology from “biblical archaeology” and the increasing amount of field excavation in both regions, was emphasis on biblical material and written source tempered by and/or augmented with more archaeological data and critical perspectives, which enabled Palestinian-Egyptian relations to be viewed through something other than either biblical

lens or pharaonic hubris. The development of increasingly sophisticated archaeological methodologies and theoretical approaches, ceramic typologies, and other technological advancements allowed for the historical and biblical material to be examined in conjunction with evidence provided by excavation and accompanying analysis of material remains. Thus, as excavation at the important sites of, for example, Tell el-Dabaa, Jericho, Samaria, and Gezer increasingly revealed the unreliability of biblical material regarding such key Egyptian-Palestinian events as the sojourn of Israel in Egypt, the Exodus, and the international relationships of the Israelite kingdoms (Silberman and Finkelstein 2002), it simultaneously demonstrated the complexity, nuance, and richness of the relationships between inhabitants of the southern Levant and Egypt and the myriad ways in which these individuals and regions interacted.

### *Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods*

Egypt’s contact with Palestine began during the fourth millennium BCE, during the Badarian and Naqada I phases, corresponding to the Palestinian Chalcolithic Period and Early Bronze Age IA (De Cree 1991). This contact—most probably of a commercial nature—is illustrated by Palestinian ceramics found in Egypt at such sites as Maadi and Minshat Abu Omar, among others (Levy and van den Brink 2002: 14, table 1.5; Chłodnicki 2008; see also Braun and van den Brink 2008). Likewise, a limited amount of Egyptian material is found in the southern Levant (Harrison 1993; Braun 2002).

Egyptian-Palestinian interaction intensified during Egypt’s Naqada II-III, corresponding to the Early Bronze Age IB in the southern Levant, and reached its apex in Dynasty I. During this time, large quantities of Egyptian and Egyptianizing material are attested throughout southern Palestine, at sites such as En Besor, Tel Erani, Nahal Tillah, and Tell el-Sakan. In addition to the extremely large volume of ceramics, much of which is of a rather prosaic nature, mud sealings at En Besor (Schulman 1976, 1992) and *serekhs* (early representations of the king’s name in

hieroglyphs enclosed within a diagram of the palace gateway and usually surmounted by an image of the Horus falcon) of various Early Dynastic pharaohs excavated at the sites of Arad, Tel Erani, Tel Halif, and Tell el-Sakan, among others (Levy et al. 2001, figs. 22.13-14; Levy and van den Brink 2002: 22, table 1.9, footnote 11), attest to an active Egyptian presence in the southwestern southern Levant (fig. 2). In addition, evidence for an Egyptian flint industry in Palestine has been noted at En Besor and Tel Erani (Rosen 1988).



Figure 2. Pottery sherd with inscribed *serekh* found at Arad.

The vast quantities of Egyptian material found at sites throughout southern Palestine point to an active and flourishing interaction between regions. The utilitarian aspect of the Egyptian ceramics—used for cooking, baking, etc., rather than as containers for “luxury” goods—suggests the existence of a resident Egyptian population in southern Palestine during this period. This phenomenon has been interpreted by some scholars as illustrative of an Egyptian colonial presence (de Miroschedji and Sadeq 2001; Braun and van den Brink 2008), and by others as representative of a more commercial relationship (de Miroschedji 2002). Regardless of precise interpretation, all evidence indicates that southern Palestine was strongly influenced by Egypt during this period, perhaps stemming from Egyptian

policies of, and efforts toward, resource acquisition and control (Cohen 2016: 31).

### *Old Kingdom*

Following the intensive Egyptian presence in the Predynastic Period, Egyptian interests in Palestine steadily declined, starting in mid-Dynasty II and continuing through the Old Kingdom, corresponding to Palestinian Early Bronze Age II through Early Bronze Age III, into the Intermediate Bronze Age. This change is marked by a corresponding decrease in the amount of Egyptian materials found in the southern Levant (Braun and van den Brink 2008: 651). Such materials as do exist, such as palettes and other small items (Sowada 2009), are indicative of small-scale exchange and movement of smaller luxury goods. Old Kingdom activities instead focused primarily on exploitation of copper and other resources in Sinai (Gardiner and Peet 1955). Overall, the Egyptian commercial and military presence in Palestine remained minimal during the Old Kingdom; the former is illustrated by the decrease in quantity, quality, and distribution of materials, and the only evidence for the latter derives from the isolated campaign mentioned in the Egyptian *Tale of Weni*.

### *First Intermediate Period*

The minimal Egyptian interest and activities in the southern Levant during the Old Kingdom continued into the First Intermediate Period, contemporary with the latter part of the Intermediate Bronze Age. There is little evidence for Egyptian activity in Palestine proper, and Egyptian direct control over mining in Sinai—which flourished under Old Kingdom rule—also declined. This may have allowed for increased Palestinian participation in the copper and turquoise mining and transport previously monopolized by Egypt; the increase in settlement in Sinai and the northern Negev may be linked to this phenomenon in the later part of the Intermediate Bronze Age (Goren 1996; Haiman 1996, 2009), although establishing precise dates or phases for the sites remains difficult.

### *Middle Kingdom*

Following the reestablishment of centralized rule at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egyptian activity in the southern Levant increased during the Middle Kingdom, although the means and intensity of contact remained variable. Evidence for Egyptian interaction with Palestine derives from multiple sources, some of which are difficult to contextualize. The Egyptian textual data include the Execration Texts (Posener 1940; Sethe 1926), which list a series of locations and individuals to be magically subdued; while these imply an Egyptian knowledge of both Palestinian geography and current events, they are of uncertain use in determining the scope and type of Egyptian activity in the region (Cohen 2002: 17; 2016: 44-45). Likewise, Khu-sobek's account of Senusret III's campaign to a location traditionally identified as Shechem in northern Palestine (Goedicke 1998: 34-35; also see Baines 1987), while indicative of bellicose relations, appears to represent an isolated campaign. The limited volume of Egyptian ceramics found at Ashkelon (Stager and Voss 2011) and Tel Ifshar (Marcus, Porath, and Paley 2008; Marcus, Schiestl, et al. 2008), as well as a collection of approximately 40 mud sealings found at the former site (Stager et al., eds. 2008: 224), however, suggests economic ties between the two regions. Taken together, this evidence presents a picture of variable and sporadic Egyptian contact with Palestine, consisting of minor military actions combined with small-scale commercial contact. Overall, regardless of type, Egyptian contact with Palestine remained both minimal and sporadic during the Middle Kingdom (Cohen 2016).

### *Second Intermediate Period*

As Egypt entered a second phase of decentralization in the Second Intermediate Period, its relationship with the southern Levant again changed accordingly. Egyptian activities in Palestine—already sporadic and variable in the preceding Middle Kingdom—decreased still further. Likewise, as the urban centers in Palestine gained in strength and power, southern Levantine cultural influence extended further into Egypt. Excavation at

Egyptian sites such as Tell el-Dabaa (ancient Avaris) clearly illustrates influence from the southern Levant in ceramics and other material culture, as well as in local cult and ritual (Bietak 1996, 2007; Mumford 2014: 74), while it also demonstrates the development of a hybridized cultural corpus. In turn, Egyptian-Hyksos scarabs (Ben-Tor 2007) are found at sites throughout the southern Levant, although, to date, there is a dearth of Egyptian and/or Hyksos ceramics found in Palestine at this time.

### *New Kingdom*

The rise of the New Kingdom in the latter part of the second millennium BCE saw the establishment of an Egyptian Levantine empire that included not only the southern Levant but extended throughout the eastern Mediterranean world into the northern Levant. Contemporary with the Palestinian Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I, Egyptian imperial power steadily increased during the first several reigns of the New Kingdom. Egyptian political control of Palestine, and the accompanying influence on social and cultural development, are clearly reflected in Egyptian-style architecture, including temples and forts, found at sites such as Beth Shean, Deir el-Balah, and Tel Mor (fig. 3). Sizable corpora of ceramics (Killebrew 2005; Martin 2011) and other material culture found throughout Palestine clearly reflect either Egyptian origin or Egyptian influence and make up a large percentage of the material culture remains (Mumford 2006, 2007). In addition, anthropoid coffins found at Deir el-Balah and Tell el-Farah (South) also help to illustrate the Egyptian influence in the southern Levant (figs. 4a and 4b).

The textual data and historical records from New Kingdom Egypt also reveal the strong scope of Egyptian activities in Palestine, as well as in surrounding regions in the eastern Mediterranean. For example, among the myriad Egyptian texts from this period, Thutmose III's account of his Megiddo campaign (Redford 2003) and the Amarna Letters from the reigns of Amenhotep III and

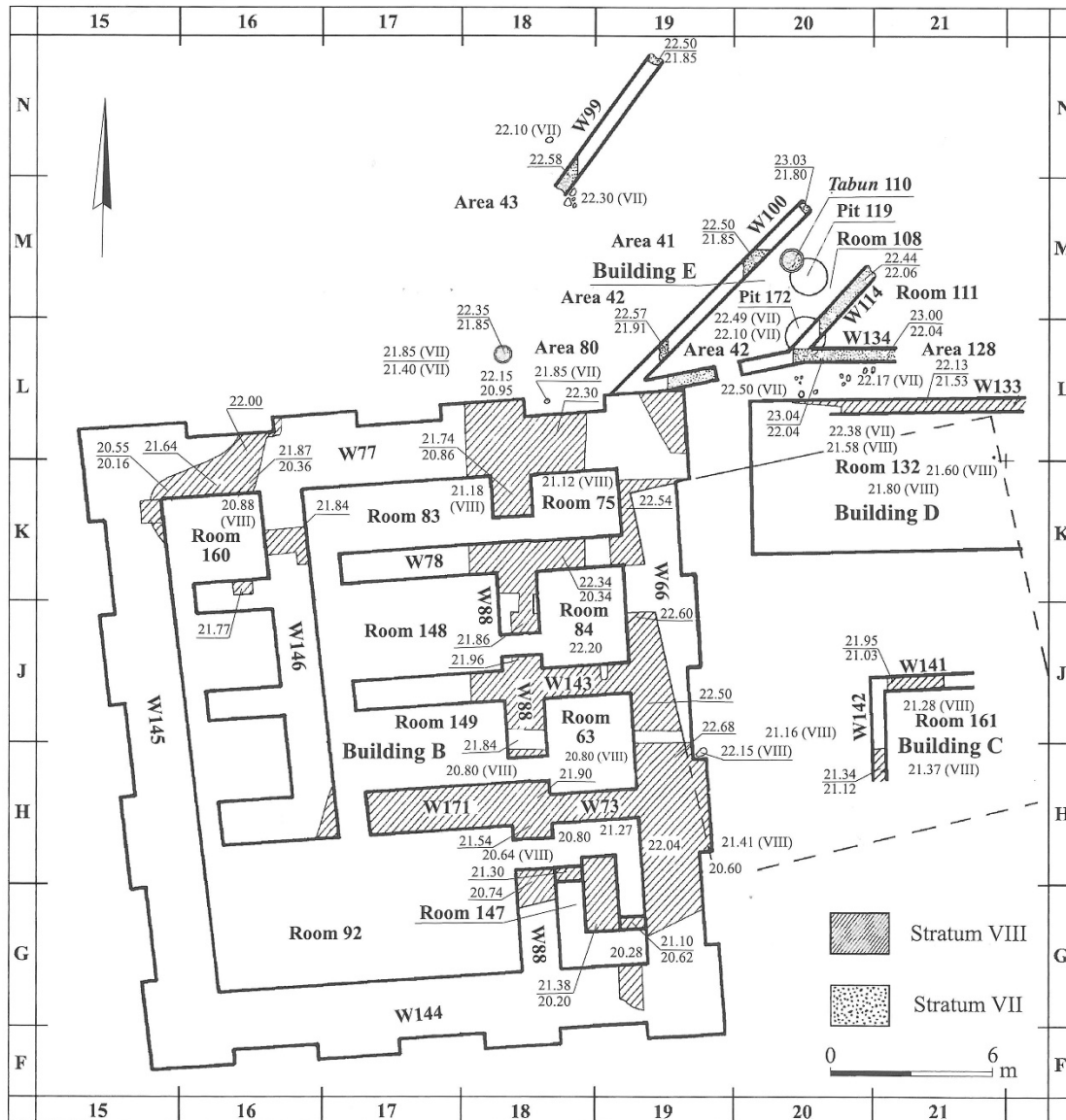


Figure 3. Plan reflecting Egyptian-style architecture at Tel Mor in Palestine.

Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten (Moran, ed. 1992) illustrate the imperial nature of Egyptian activity in the southern Levant from the early New Kingdom through the Amarna Period; the latter texts also provide a wealth of information regarding settlement and political organization in the southern Levant, as well as details regarding Palestinian interaction with Egypt.

During the later New Kingdom, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egypt experienced the slow decline of its Levantine empire—part of the upheaval noted throughout the

Mediterranean world at this time (Cline 2014). The disruption of Egyptian hegemony in Palestine may perhaps be traced to the arrival of the Sea Peoples, and Egypt’s encounters with them, during the reigns of Merenptah and Ramesses III (Cline 2014: 109ff.; van Dijk 2000: 303-305). The decline in the Egyptian empire in the southern Levant attested by historical sources is matched by a slow but measurable decline in the extent and number of Egyptian artifacts found in Palestinian contexts post-Dynasty XX (Mumford 2014).

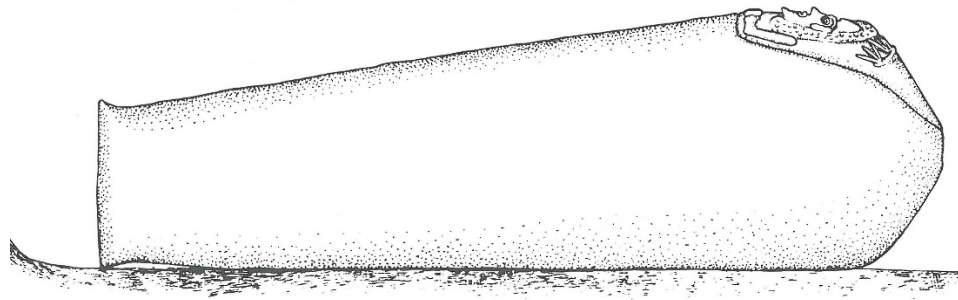
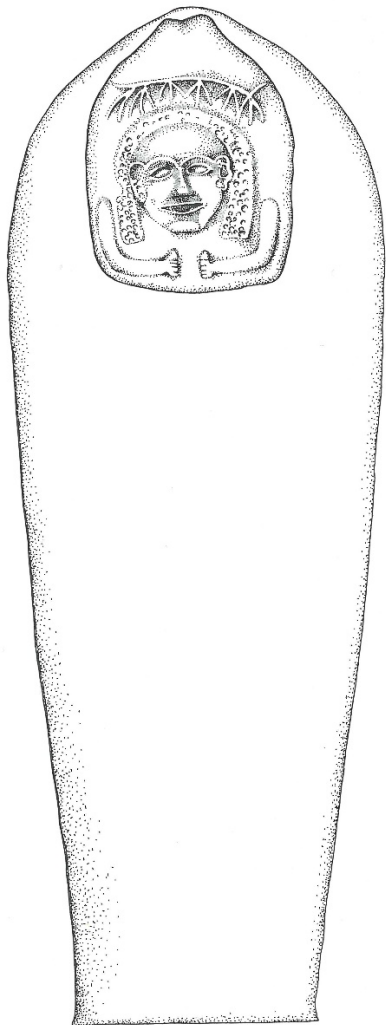


Figure 4a. Profile of anthropoid coffin from Deir el-Balah.

Figure 4b. Frontal view of anthropoid coffin from Deir el-Balah.



### *Third Intermediate Period*

Little data exist for Egyptian activity in Palestine during the Third Intermediate Period, corresponding to late Iron Age I through Iron IIA-B (Kitchen 1986). Other than a campaign by Shoshenq I of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty, c. 925 BCE, which appears to have been a singular event, there is little evidence for Egyptian presence or activity in the southern Levant. In addition, with some exceptions (e.g., at Tel Dor), the number of Egyptian and Egyptian-style objects found at sites in the southern Levant is also small, perhaps as a result of the rise of the Assyrian Empire as the dominant power over the southern Levant (Mumford 2014: 83). During the Third Intermediate Period, Palestine fell increasingly into the Assyrian, then Babylonian, political sphere of influence, and the number of Egyptian-style objects found in the southern Levant continued to decline.

### *Late Period*

Egyptian activity in the southern Levant remained minimal into the Late Period, contemporary with Palestinian Iron Age IIC and the Persian Period. While Egyptian artifacts are found at Palestinian sites during this era (Mumford 2014: 85), they represent

just one type of foreign import among many, rather than a dominant cultural or political orientation. Egyptian presence and activity in the southern Levant was mitigated by Persian control, and in this period the phenomenon of independent Egyptian activity in Palestine came to an end.

### *Significance and Conclusions*

In all periods, peoples moved between the regions of Egypt and the southern Levant, transporting goods and resources (which included people as well). From Palestine, Egypt imported oil, wine, bitumen, and other materials, and from Sinai, copper and turquoise; in turn, Egyptian goods such as gold, glass, beads and other jewelry, palettes, and alabaster vessels, among other items, were exported in varying quantities and with varying frequencies to Palestine. While the intensity and nature of Egyptian contact with the southern Levant varied over time, there was rarely a period in which there was not some interaction between the regions, and this close connection had a significant effect on both.

In the southern Levant, whether through intensive or sporadic commercial activities, imperial control, settlement, or other means, development remained linked to the presence, absence, and actions of Egypt, even during the eras in which Egypt itself experienced decentralization and/or decline in organization and power. In addition to the more visible manifestations of influence present in the ceramics, other material culture, and architecture found at sites throughout the southern Levant in different periods, Egypt also affected the nature and direction of Palestinian social, economic, and political organization, and significantly, in the late

Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period, Egypt also influenced the development of the Canaanite alphabetic script (Goldwasser 2010). For Palestine, Egypt loomed as a presence neither to be discounted nor ignored, and any interpretation of Palestinian development in the eras preceding the conquest by Alexander the Great must take this into account.

From the Egyptian perspective, however, Palestine played different roles at different times. While stereotypical language and conventional imagery portrayed the southern Levant as a region inhabited by “wretched” Asiatics, destined to be crushed and subjugated as part of Pharaonic might and right, Egyptian-Palestinian contact was both far more variable and considerably more realistic. In some eras, such as the Early Dynastic Period and the bulk of the New Kingdom, the southern Levant clearly formed part of a greater Egyptian hegemony and was viewed by Egypt as such. By contrast, in the Late Period, Palestine served as a buffer zone between Egypt and other great powers of the ancient world. At yet other times, such as during the Old and Middle Kingdoms, it is clear that the southern Levant was not the primary target of Egyptian focus and interest, leaving Palestine to develop and function at the margin of Egyptian concerns. Accordingly, the Egyptian views, descriptions, and presentations of Palestine and its inhabitants differ significantly over time, as does the nature of evidence that illustrates these interactions. Yet, just as Palestinian history was swayed by Egyptian actions, the southern Levant too contributed to the policies, fortunes, and history of Egypt—as region of settlement, trading partner, real and idealized enemy, buffer zone, and subject territory.

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### *Bibliographic Notes*

The scholarship on the history of Egyptian-southern Levantine relations is both vast and varied, ranging from general works on the subject (e.g., Bietak 2007; Mumford 2014) to more precise works on, for example, specific sites, finds, artifact types, and time periods (e.g., Ben-Tor 2007; Martin 2011). To highlight some studies, or even many, inevitably results in not mentioning others, which implies a hierarchy of sources that is neither intended nor valid, but instead reflects the necessity of selection within an immense body of literature as dictated by time and space. The

current chronological concerns derived from recent 14C analyses and their impact on Egyptian-southern Levantine relations have been highlighted most strongly in Regev et al. (2012), Höflmayer et al. (2014), and Höflmayer et al. (2016), and syntheses of the significance of some of these chronological shifts are found in Cohen (2012, 2016). Examples of the detailed presentations of the data relevant to this chronological debate may be found in Marcus, Porath, and Paley (2008) and Marcus et al. (2008), countering interpretations found, for example, in Stager and Voss (2011). There are numerous studies that focus on Egyptian activity in Palestine during specific eras. A wide variety of discussions of early Egyptian activity in Palestine in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods and through the Old Kingdom may be found in the many articles by different authors in van den Brink's and Levy's edited volume (2002). Sowada's (2009) analysis of Old Kingdom material culture and activities in the eastern Mediterranean likewise offers up-to-date perspectives on Egyptian relations with Palestine during that period. Cohen (2002, 2016) provides overviews and discussion of Egyptian activities in Palestine for both the Old and Middle kingdoms, and the New Kingdom is presented at length in Killebrew (2005), Martin (2011), and Mumford (2006). One of the primary works on the Egyptian Third Intermediate Period remains Kitchen (1986), and Egyptian interests in Palestine in the later periods are well described in Mumford (2007).

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- Figure 1. Map of ancient Egypt and Palestine (adapted from Cohen 2016: fig. 1.1).
- Figure 2. Pottery sherd with inscribed *serekb* found at Arad (Levy and van den Brink 2002: 27, fig. 1.1).
- Figure 3. Plan reflecting Egyptian-style architecture at Tel Mor in Palestine (Barako 2007: 20, plan 2.4).
- Figure 4a. Profile of anthropoid coffin from Deir el-Balah (adapted from Dothan 1979: 55, fig. 123).
- Figure 4b. Frontal view of anthropoid coffin from Deir el-Balah (adapted from Dothan 1979: 54, fig. 122).