

Egyptian Stone Vessels in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age / Andrea Squitieri

When Canaan came under Egyptian dominion in the Late Bronze Age, a large quantity of stone vessels produced in Egyptian workshops reached the region. The vessels were made of calcite, a form of calcium carbonate, white to yellow in color, translucent and often banded, and sometimes referred to in literature as Egyptian alabaster or travertine. In Egypt, the abundance of geological sources for this material along the Nile stimulated the intense production of calcite vessels since the time of the Old Kingdom. Such vessels were used in a wide variety of contexts, such as temples, private tombs, and royal burials.

The Egyptian origin of the calcite vessels found in Canaan is inferred from their shapes, because these are closely paralleled by vessels discovered in Egypt. However, it has been suggested that Canaanite workshops may have produced some of the calcite vessels found in Canaan. In support of this hypothesis, it is worth mentioning the recent discovery of a calcite deposit near Jerusalem. It is not clear, however, whether this deposit was exploited during the Late Bronze Age. Moreover, it should be noted that, although it is possible that Canaanite workshops replicated some Egyptian calcite vessels, this production does not seem to have left direct archaeological evidence, such as production waste or unfinished items. Therefore, based on current evidence, it seems reasonable that the bulk of the calcite vessels found in Canaan did indeed arrive from Egypt.

The calcite vessels found in Canaan in Late Bronze Age I contexts include forms already present during the Middle Bronze Age, such as the so-called kohl pot. These forms appear in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom and continue up until the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty; the same chronological trend occurs in the Levant, with the latest example attested at Tell el-Ajjul in the Late Bronze Age I. The Late Bronze Age II witnessed a dramatic increase in the quantity of calcite vessels in Canaan in comparison with the previous periods, as well as the appearance of new shapes. This phenomenon parallels Thutmose III's conquests in the Levant and can be explained by the inclusion of Canaan in the Egyptian administrative system and the intensification of relations between the two regions. Virtually all the calcite vessel forms from Egyptian Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasty contexts are also attested in Canaan. The most common forms are tazzas, pilgrim flasks, ovoid jars, footed jars, amphorae, and juglets imitating Cypriot base-ring ware (fig. 18). Overall, these vessels range in size from small portable items, perhaps used for cosmetics, perfumes, or dry goods, to large-size vases, possibly used as ordinary liquid containers but with particularly aesthetic appearances. Decorated forms corresponding to the Egyptian types are also attested in Canaan. Examples include vessels with duck-head handles or with painted upper bodies and necks, such as one featuring painted petals that came to light in Megiddo.

Egyptian vessels can be found throughout Canaan, especially in the Coastal Plain and Judean Hills. The sites that have yielded the majority of them are Tell el-Ajjul, Lachish, Megiddo, and Beth Shean. Tell el-Ajjul yielded the largest number during the Late Bronze Age I, indicating that at that time it played an important role in the Egyptian stone-vessel trade; however, it seems to have progressively lost this role during the Late Bronze Age II in favor of Lachish, which is indicative of the profound Egyptian influence on the latter by this time. Another large concentration of vessels can be seen at Megiddo, strategically located on the trade route connecting the Mediterranean to the interior through the Jezreel Valley; and at Beth Shean, an Egyptian military outpost after Thutmose III's conquests.

The stone vessels could have reached Canaan in various ways. Some vessels may have been the personal possessions of Egyptian soldiers, emissaries, and officials who had been sent to Canaan at

this time, and who retained their cultural habits concerning the use of these items. However, the wide distribution of Egyptian vessels throughout the region and their attestation in several types of contexts, including temples, settlements, and tombs, leads to the conclusion that the local population may have used these objects, too, perhaps acquiring them via a commercial trade network. It is notable that only one calcite vessel fragment bearing a royal inscription (from Gezer) is known from southern Canaan at this time, as opposed to many attested in the northern Levant (for example, at Byblos and Ugarit), which may indicate that Egyptian vessels circulated in Canaan mainly outside the more formal and official network. Therefore, the consumption of Egyptian vessels in Canaan should not be confined only to the presence here of Egyptian personnel, but seems to be part of the broader phenomenon regarding the diffusion of Egyptian practices among the local population and the adoption of Egyptian or Egyptianizing motifs in the material culture, such as architecture and crafts. Indeed, Egyptian stone vessels also had a large impact on the gypsum vessel workshops located in the Jordan Valley, which adopted many Egyptian shapes (e.g., tazzas), adapting them to local tastes.

The Late Bronze Age II was a peak period for the presence of Egyptian calcite vessels in Canaan, but with the rise of the Egyptian Twentieth Dynasty in the early twelfth century BCE, the number of these vessels drops dramatically. The few that were discovered in contexts of this period at Lachish, Megiddo, and Beth Shean belong to types already present in the country beforehand and may be heirlooms from the previous century. The progressive weakening and final termination of the Egyptian dominion in Canaan by the end of the twelfth century BCE evidently disrupted the trade network by which Canaan was supplied of stone vessels. It was only in the Late Iron Age and the Persian Period that another large influx of stone vessels from Egypt penetrated the southern Levant, but this time within a very different political framework.

References: Aston 1994, types 107, 140; Ben-Dor 1945; Bevan 2007, 144; Frumkin et al. 2014; Klemm and Klemm 2008, 147; Lilyquist 1996; Loud 1948, figs. 261.29, 31; Macalister 1912, pl. 24.1; Nicholson and Shaw 2009, 5–77; Petrie 1931, pls. 25.31, 26.11; Sparks 1996; Sparks 2003; Sparks 2007, 270 and fig. 96.