

THE LOTUS FLOWER AS ROYAL ATTRIBUTE:
A CANAANITE RE-INTERPRETATION OF AN EGYPTIAN MOTIF

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The lotus flower is a ubiquitous motif in Egyptian art, related to concepts of rebirth and afterlife, and frequently depicted in funerary and libation ceremonies. Although its origins are to be found in the Nilotic swamps, it was in the Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1140 BCE) that the lotus underwent a process of re-interpretation, becoming a vehicle for the Canaanite perception of royal attributes. Its symbolism thereby became intertwined with the iconographic motif of the branch, understood synecdochally as the Mesopotamian Tree of Life. This discussion aims to present the archaeological evidence of the lotus motif as attested through different kinds of media, highlighting its iconographic development and, accordingly, the Canaanite role in creating new and hybrid visual types through the reworking of foreign motifs, in accordance with the local ideology.

Keywords: Lotus flower; Egypt; Canaan; kingship, iconography

1. SYMBOLISM OF THE BLUE LOTUS FLOWER IN EGYPTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

As is well known, the lotus flower is one of the most common plant motifs attested in Egyptian iconography. Botanically speaking, the lotuses represented in ancient Egyptian art are two indigenous waterlilies, the blue flowered (*nymphaea caerulea*) which is diurnal and flowers from sunrise to midday, and the white lotus (*nymphaea-lotus*) which is nocturnal and flowers from night-time until the morning.¹ In terms of its symbolic properties, the blue lotus has been a constant reminder of regeneration and rebirth, symbolizing eternal life and the cyclical path of the sun.² Accordingly, the Nilotic blue lotus also had a pivotal importance in Egyptian cosmology, as it is described for instance in the 5th dynasty Pyramid Text of Unas (ca. 2375-2345 BCE) where the lotus is portrayed as the first living being to emerge from the primordial water of *Nun*.³ The flower's regenerative value is also mentioned in chapter 18 of the Book of the Dead, where the spell 81 for taking the form of a lotus refers to the act of resurrection.⁴

This religious power of the lotus flower is especially represented in the material culture, an outstanding example of which is the wooden portrait of Tutankhamon depicted in the guise of Nefertem "Lord of Perfumes" (who represented the fragrant lotus), and who is born from a blue lotus in order to wish rebirth.⁵ The theological relationships of Nefertem, however, go beyond the simple association with perfume. Iconographically, *Nfr-tm* could be depicted through a wide variety of phenotypes. He was often shown in anthropomorphic form standing

¹ McDonald 2018, 3.

² Van Loon 1986, 245.

³ McDonald 2018, 4.

⁴ Two versions are attested for the formula of making a transformation into a lotus. The earliest dates to the mid- to late 18th Dyn. and comes from the Papyrus of Nu "the overseers of the palace"; the second version comes instead from the Papyrus of Paqerer, "head confectioner of Ptah", dated to the 19th Dyn. (Quirke 2013, 192-193; Wallis Budge 2016, 137).

⁵ Wilkinson 1992, 120, fig. 1. For a good photo of the item, see Egyptian Museum Cairo JE 60723, or also the Wikipedia link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Head_of_Nefertem.

with a lotus atop his head, but he could also appear as a child sitting on a throne in a solar disk, or as a mummy - shaped god with a lotus on the head and a *w*'s sceptre in the hand, or provided with different headdress such as the *atef*, the *hprš* or the double crown, as well as a lion - headed god or even as a ram crouching on a lotus flower.⁶ Such variety of images reveals the multiple associations that the lotus god had with other major deities of the Egyptian pantheon. Indeed, later traditions describe Nefertem as the son of Sekhmet and Ptah, his composite figure nevertheless arose already during the 4th Dyn., from the encounter between Re and the Heliopolitan ninety.⁷ Further, Nefertem was probably the main deity originally invoked during the litany recited during the Sokar-festival, and was even involved in the creation process, as “*Urgott in Planzengestalt*” (a primal god in plant form), for the flower itself is the beginning and the world comes into life as a plant.⁸ Finally, its emblem was symbolically also linked to the wish for a good start of the new year, as well as to the sun and kingship.⁹

The symbolic value of the lotus flower finds material comparison in the large number of lotus imageries. One of the earliest attestations of this design occurs as decorative pattern in the 5th Dyn. on a panel forming a matting hung behind the seated figure of a man named Re-Shepses.¹⁰ In the Early Middle Kingdom the lotus can appear alone as main motif carved on ovoid seals and some scarabs, often associated to geometric patterns such as loops and spirals, and to good-luck signs.¹¹ The representations of lotus flowers become especially widespread during the New Kingdom, when they are largely attested both in monumental and minor arts, i.e. in architecture as wall paintings decorations, floral friezes or columns as well as on scarabs and on various category of objects which can also reproduce the morphology of the bud.¹² For example, it was a favourite subject for the design of vessels, as attested by several lotiform chalices in faience or alabaster.¹³ It is also found in countless depictions of banquets and offering scenes,¹⁴ which will directly influence the representations of minor arts in the Southern Levant. The offering of the lotus is represented on stela especially (fig. 1:2), for example those offered by human beings to divine figures,¹⁵ as well as being engraved on seals where, in order to fit the material support, the motif is reduced to a sitting or kneeling figure depicted as smelling the lotus. Such imagery has a long-lasting tradition, being attested as early as the 6th Dyn. (fig. 1:3) and achieving its canonical style during the Middle Kingdom

⁶ Leitz ed. 2002, 221-225; Morenz - Schubert 1954, pl. I:1-3.

⁷ Munro 1969, 36.

⁸ Munro 1969, 39-40; Morenz - Schubert 1954, 43.

⁹ Munro 1969, 36.

¹⁰ Kantor 1945, 66.

¹¹ See for instance, Israel Museum IAA: 76.31.2037; 76.30.1715; 76.30.1720; 76.30.1721; 76.31.2876.

¹² For some 18th Dyn. scarabs and scaraboids, see Israel Museum IAA: 76.30.1876; 76.30.1879; 76.31.2535; 76.31.3074; and especially a scarab depicting a striding human figure above a *nb* sign holding a long-stem lotus flower (IAA: 76.31.4077). Note that these scarabs, as the previous ones mentioned, are a donation to the Israel Museum, they are not originated from Canaanite sites.

¹³ See for instance Hawass 2013, 71; Giovetti - Picchi 2016, 341, VI.30. See also Kantor 1945, 74-78.

¹⁴ For instance, the Tomb of Sennefer (TT 96) 18th Dyn. (1439-1413 BCE), or the woman's banquet depicted on the wall of the Tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100) 18th Dyn. (ca. 1400 BCE) at Abd el-Gurna (Tiradritti 2007, 214-215). See also Wilkinson 1992, 120, figs. 2-3.

¹⁵ See for example the Stela of Urener from Abydos (Giovetti - Picchi 2016, 345, VI.38) or the offering of a priest to Ra-Harakhty on a later stela (Louvre Museum, inventory number N. 3795).

with the spread of the scarab seals (fig. 1:4).¹⁶ This is indeed the archetype that will directly influence the Levantine production and iconography, and in particular the early production of the Canaanite scarabs, as it will be demonstrated in the following sections.

2. VEGETAL ELEMENTS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY: BETWEEN THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE BRANCH

Before moving on to the archaeological evidence from the Southern Levant, it will be useful to first briefly retrace the long iconographic tradition of the vegetal elements in ancient Near Eastern art, specifically the Tree of Life (or sacred tree) and its cosmic significance. Conceptually, the “sacred tree” appeared as early as the IV mill. BCE and became a common ideological component throughout Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant by the II mill. BCE.¹⁷ The definition “Tree of Life” is, however, found in Genesis 2:9; 3:22-44 and in Proverbs only, where reference is made to a plant able to bestow immortality to those who ate its fruit.¹⁸ Indeed, extrabiblical references to such a tree are extremely rare and the expression is virtually unknown in the Mesopotamian written sources, conversely, only few Egyptian wisdom texts bear traces of the expression “tree of life”.¹⁹ Despite the absence of a univocal definition of the plant of life, both iconographic and textual allusions do actually exist to plants, trees and herbs associated with life-giving powers and flanked by deities, humans and animals since the III mill. BCE.²⁰

It seems in fact that different types of plants played different roles and were associated to the notion of life due to their properties, framed in their geographical and cultural context. For instance, some scholars equated the tree of life with the Sumerian black pine (*kiškanû*),²¹ in Tablet XI of the Epic of Gilgamesh, *Ūta-napišti* reveals to the hero the existence of a “plant of the heartbeat” thanks to which a man can regain his vitality.²² In New Kingdom Egypt, more common trees mentioned or depicted as sacred include the Nile acacia, Persian tree, tamarisk, palm and date palm, although the sycamore associated to the goddess Nut seems to be the main life-giving tree.²³ Additionally, in the “Prayer to Thot” the god appears personified by a large dum-palm, while in “The Great Cairo Hymn of Praise to Amun-Re”, of which the best preserved version dates to the 18th Dyn., the god is described as the creator of the Tree of Life but without further taxonomic clarification.²⁴ Finally, in Neo-Assyrian environment few letters belonging to the royal correspondence also refer to a “herb of life” (Akk. *Šam-me balāti*), being placed by the king in the mouth of his subordinates in a way comparable with the Egyptian *ankh* sign.²⁵ This overview demonstrated how the *topos* of the Tree of Life could appear in the guise of different plants, regardless, despite the great variety

¹⁶ For some 13th-15th dynasty scarabs see Petrie 1925, pl. XIV:940-943.

¹⁷ Echols 2020, 5.

¹⁸ Osborne 2014, 114-115; Echols 2020, 5-6, 9.

¹⁹ Osborne 2014; Echols 2020, 15.

²⁰ Osborne 2014, 115; Portuese 2018, 97; Echols 2020, 8-10.

²¹ Echols 2020, 8.

²² Echols 2020, 14.

²³ Osborne 2014, 117; Echols 2020, 15.

²⁴ Osborne 2014, 124-125.

²⁵ Portuese 2018, 93-98; Echols 2020, 11.

of documented species, in the ancient Near Eastern art this is most often identified with the uniformly diffused date palm.²⁶

This was the tree of eternal life *par excellence*, also by virtue of its versatility, since it was important for not only food and construction purposes (in making tools), but also for offering shadow and indicating the presence of water.²⁷ Consequently, human interaction with nature directly affected the Mesopotamian iconography. Cylinder seals, in particular, often display the tree as a central motif, placed at the centre of the composition and usually providing water to supplicants, or being worshipped by a variety of creatures, such as fish or caprids as well as semi-divine hybrid creatures.²⁸ This symbolism was later extended across the Levant, as is for instance demonstrated by the palm tree found on some Late Bronze Megiddo's ivories. It is also found in the form of the column capital in the Iron Age,²⁹ which became the hallmark of Israelite and Judahite architecture.³⁰

Furthermore, due to the reproductive cycle and regenerative properties of the plant, the paradigmatic association of the sacred tree with the divine feminine became an artistic convention across the whole of the Near East, with both motifs being visually depicted in the same constellation.³¹ The archaeological record of Mesopotamia, Levant and Egypt amply testifies to the importance of deity-tree hybrids, which are intended as goddesses of the Tree of Life.³² For example, an Akkadian cylinder seal from Mari depicts a hybrid human-tree vegetation goddess emerging from the flood,³³ while on another seal coming from Kermansha in Iran (ca. 2500 BCE) the tree-goddess is depicted emerging from the earth at the centre of the composition like a tree, providing food to the surrounding animals (fig. 2:5). In other portrayals she could also appear covered by branches while seating or standing.³⁴

The association between the sacred tree and the divine feminine is also attested in the Levantine iconography from the Middle Bronze Age,³⁵ especially on pendants, cylinder seals and scarabs representing a naked female figure sprouting branches from her pudenda (fig. 2:7) or also flanked by branches (fig. 2:8).³⁶ Visual sources hence testify to the interchangeability between the naked goddess and the sacred tree in the symbolic language of the Levant, where an important shift occurred in the Late Bronze Age when the anthropomorphic naked goddess was largely replaced by the image of the tree flanked by caprids.³⁷

Besides this cosmic and symbolic dimension, a further common and more functional association in the Ancient Near Eastern iconographic tradition concerns the sacred tree and

²⁶ Keel - Schroer 2015, 43. See also Ziffer 2010.

²⁷ Ziffer 2002, 13; Keel - Schroer 2015, 43.

²⁸ Balogh 2020, 35. See for instance Amiet 1980, pls. 23:387, 34:537; Keel 1998, figs. 11-13.

²⁹ See Loud 1939, pl. 6:13-15; Novacek 2011, 87, figs. 43a-b.

³⁰ Beautiful examples are the royal limestone capitals inspired by the palm-tree motif found at Jerusalem and Ramat Rahel dating to the 9th-7th century BCE (Israel Museum IAA: 1955-27).

³¹ Balogh 2020, 36.

³² Balogh 2020, 35.

³³ Keel - Schroer 2015, fig. 19.

³⁴ Keel 1998, figs. 5a-b.

³⁵ Balogh 2020, 41.

³⁶ For some examples, see Keel 1998, figs. 17-20, 22-24, 26; 1990, 214, fig. 43.

³⁷ Keel 1998, 35. This motif is also pivotal in the coeval Canaanite painted pottery (Choi 2016).

kingship.³⁸ Indeed, the tree or goddess-tree not only acts alone as a provider of protection, but also depends on the king being a guarantor of order and the prosperity of the nation.³⁹ This concept is well expressed in the figurative language of the banquet scene from the early dynastic period, where banqueters depicted with raised cups may also hold up a branch.⁴⁰ The Mesopotamian iconographic sources for this phenotype of the throned figure, who can be properly identified as a ruler, are numerous.⁴¹ Of interest for our discussion is that the same artistic convention is found for the naked goddess, in which the branch stands as *pars pro toto* for the sacred palm tree, which is held in the lower hand of the ruler (fig. 2:6).⁴² Furthermore, the position of the branch in such iconographic contexts conveys an additional symbolic meaning, by representing another royal insignia, i.e. the sceptre. Such imagery, which was already consolidated in the III mill., became a key metaphor for exercising kingship.⁴³ Another piece of evidence is found, in the Syrian environment, on a marvellous Middle Bronze II ivory funerary talisman belonging to the “Lord of the goats” at Ebla, which depicts the banquet protagonist seated on a stool while holding a long pastoral staff.⁴⁴ P. Matthiae has interpreted this staff as an example of Old Syrian royal insignia, and he also points out that the central element in the Syrian iconographic scheme was constituted by the sacred tree.⁴⁵ During the Middle Bronze Age, the ambivalence between branch and pastoral sceptre seems to be a largely attested iconographic convention that spread, especially by means of glyptic, throughout the Levant. Syro-Palestinian cylinder seals of the period provide us with many examples of floral sceptres of the most varied types, some of which resemble a palm tree, while others seem to recall the Egyptian *w*'s sceptre, and still others have the appearance of a lotus flower (fig. 2:9). The lotus can appear with either a short or a long-curved stem, and also either growing or held similarly to a tree. These sceptres are held by Pharaohs as well as by non-Egyptianizing figures,⁴⁶ and were assimilated into Syro-Levantine scenes with nature imagery, sometimes also being accompanied by the sacred tree.⁴⁷ Such iconographic choices can undoubtedly be attributed to the spread of Egyptian flower-holding images in the Levant by means of scarabs in the Middle Bronze Age. However, on glyptic the distinction between the offering of the flower and the floral sceptre is not always clear, since the plant can also appear held between two figures.⁴⁸

³⁸ Ziffer 2002, 13.

³⁹ Among the king's many functions, prosperity was his responsibility as it is symbolically represented on a number of III mill. cylinder seal depicting a priest-king feeding the sacred herd by offering a plant. See for instance Amiet 1980, pls. 43:636B-637B; 44:640.

⁴⁰ Ziffer 2005, 134.

⁴¹ See Amiet 1980, pls. 88:1155, 1157; 89:1168; 93:1222-1225. It should be noted how the branch, with just one exception, is always bent downwards.

⁴² An exception is found on a paleo-Syrian cylinder seal, which probably depicts a ruler holding up a palm branch while being offered a vase (Keel 1990, 177, fig. 11).

⁴³ Ziffer 2005, 138.

⁴⁴ Matthiae 1995, 505.

⁴⁵ Matthiae 1989, 369.

⁴⁶ Teissier 1996, 106, fig. 222.

⁴⁷ Teissier 1996, 54, fig. 28.

⁴⁸ Teissier 1996, 108.

3. THE ICONOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOTUS FLOWER MOTIF IN CANAANITE ART

Having considered the iconographic reduction of the tree of life to a branch and serving its function as a symbol of kingship through the sceptre, let us now analyse the Levantine evidence of the lotus motif, and their gradual local development in Canaanite art.

The Eastern Mediterranean has been properly defined as a meeting point and a “Cultural Bridge” between the civilizations of the Ancient Near East.⁴⁹ With regard to the relations with Egypt, mutual exchanges between the two areas, with the resulting import of Egyptian and Egyptianizing items, are documented already between the late 5th mill. to the early III mill.⁵⁰ The earliest contacts, as also evidenced by the distribution of stone vessels bearing Egyptian royal names, revealed that these were particularly intense with Byblos during the Old and Middle Kingdom, and with Ugarit from the time of Amenhotep II to Ramesses II.⁵¹

Indeed, in the Deposit F in the Obelisk Temple at Byblos, the lotus appears as decoration on a faience figurine of a hippopotamus already in the Middle Bronze I-II (1850-1650 BCE).⁵² Always at Byblos, a number of Egyptian and Egyptianizing ivories was discovered in the area of the Balaat Gebal Temple depicting, among other animals and symbols, also lotus flowers;⁵³ vegetal decorations in the shapes of lotus and papyrus also appear on silver mirrors in Tombs I and II, dated to the Middle Bronze IIB.⁵⁴

Even further north, Egyptianizing inlays considered to be local emulations of Egyptian motifs and bearing lotus and papyrus depictions come from Palace P at Ebla, dated to II mill. BCE.⁵⁵ Interestingly, these inlays probably represent the remains of a box or furniture.⁵⁶ Comparable to these workings is, in the Southern Levant, a group of 32 engraved bone plaques belonging to a decorated jewellery box from the Canaanite ceremonial palace of Hazor, likewise dated, on a stylistic background, to the Middle Bronze IIB.⁵⁷ This box is an outstanding example of the “international” nature of the Canaanite art, merging together Syrian and Egyptian motifs.⁵⁸ Important for our discussion is the presence of human figures, both male and female, holding lotuses which, especially in the case of male figures, are not clearly discernible.⁵⁹ Interestingly, also in this case A. Ben-Tor stressed the iconographic confusion attested in Syrian and Palestinian glyptic between the sceptre and the lotus leaf.⁶⁰

The flow of Egyptian imports and local reproductions undergoes a change in correspondence with the initial mass production of scarabs which was triggered by the Tell el-Dab‘a workshop towards the beginning of the second intermediate period (ca. 1700-1650 BCE), marking a period of commercial and cultural contacts between Egypt and Southern Levant after a millennium of exchanges focused on the Northern Levant.⁶¹

⁴⁹ Lippke 2011, 212.

⁵⁰ Ahrens 2020, 22.

⁵¹ Sparks 2003, 48-52; Kopetzky 2018, 353.

⁵² Miniaci 2018, 398.

⁵³ Ahrens 2022, 162-163.

⁵⁴ Kopetzky 2018, figs. 12-13.

⁵⁵ Ahrens 2022, 161-164, 421, fig. D.7.

⁵⁶ Ahrens 2022, 162.

⁵⁷ A. Ben-Tor 2009.

⁵⁸ A. Ben-Tor 2009, 55.

⁵⁹ A. Ben-Tor 2009, 17, fig. 11.

⁶⁰ A. Ben-Tor 2009, 21.

⁶¹ Ben-Tor - Weinstein 2022, 14.

With the development of Canaanite scarabs in the Southern Levant, the iconographic repertoire is enriched by the overlapping of the two cultural spheres and exhibits the introduction of other motifs and new visual hybridizations.⁶² In this context, we can also see the spread of human figures bearing floral sceptres, similar to the examples seen above on the cylinder seals.

The branch in particular, which stems from an Eastern tradition, is one of the most distinctive Canaanite iconographic motifs (often in combination with the caprid). It is in fact not attested on Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period scarabs, while it appears between Middle Bronze IIA-IIB (ca. 1700-1650 BCE) on Canaanite scarabs belonging to the early Palestinian series.⁶³ Among the floral motifs attested besides the branch, we can also observe the introduction of some from the Egyptian tradition, such as the three-stem papyrus and the lotus flower. They were initially employed as decorative elements above a central design,⁶⁴ sometimes also being placed on the back of the scarab.⁶⁵ However, from originally being simple decorative elements, both the branch and the lotus come to be associated with human figures, both standing and kneeling (fig. 3:10).⁶⁶ The available examples display the interchangeability between the branch and the flower, and such ambivalence is still found in the late Palestinian series (1650-1550 BCE) where the vegetal attribute is held as if it were a sceptre by figures identifiable as human, divine (such as the hawk-headed god) or royal (who are recognizable as such by the presence of other additional attributes taken from Egyptian imagery) (fig. 3:11).⁶⁷ The depictions of human figures holding a flower or a branch were most probably inspired from late Middle Kingdom private - name scarabs bearing the image of their owner, where some of them are represented as holding a flower.⁶⁸

The attestations of this iconographic motif are truly abundant in the Middle Bronze Age, whereas curiously, scarabs depicting human figures holding lotuses become much more sporadic in the Late Bronze Age when the motif mainly appears alone or as a secondary motif.⁶⁹

⁶² For a broader discussion on the concept of “liminal zones” and “hybridity”, see Stockhammer ed. 2012, 45.

⁶³ Ben-Tor 2007, 117. The branch is one of the motifs taken from Near Eastern iconography (Ben-Tor - Weinstein 2022, 11).

⁶⁴ Ben-Tor 2007, pl. 50:1-8. Also noteworthy is the presence of both the lotus and the branch in the centre of the composition as decorative elements in figs. 9-11 of the same plate.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, the MB IIB scarabs from Megiddo, in which is the back decorated with lotus flowers combined with branches (Keel 2017, n. 569).

⁶⁶ See Ben-Tor 2007, pl. 63:1-7, 20-26; Keel 1997, 79 n. 2.

⁶⁷ The ambivalence between these attributes is evident on two scarabs from Akko (Keel 1997, 545 n. 39, 593 n. 177). At Tell el-Far'ah (S) a hawk-headed god is displayed between two uraei while holding a lotus-sceptre, but still accompanied by a branch (Keel 2010b, 47 n. 41). This symbolic combination is even clearer on a scarab from Tell el-Ajjul where the divine figure holds a half branch-half lotus sceptre (Keel 1997, 197 n. 278). Here the lotus-sceptre instead appears held by figures presenting royal attributes such as the crown, the uraeus on the forehead, the kilt and the pharaonic smiting pose for example at Jerusalem and again at Tell el-Ajjul (Keel 2017, 287 n.18; 1997, 469 n. 1065). Finally, interesting is another scarab from Tell el-Dab'a which represents an Egyptian king in menacing pose but holding a palm branch. The scene has been interpreted as a symbolic hunt due to the presence of two fishes (Ben-Tor - Weinstein 2022, fig. 1:3).

⁶⁸ Ben-Tor 2007, 148, pls. 19:41, 20:3-5.

⁶⁹ In the Late Bronze Age Canaan, one of the most frequent uses of the lotus as a decorative element is in association with the name Amun-Re.

For instance, the lotus design appears in the Lachish Fosse Temple in association with a *djed* sign on the front of a pottery vessel and on two other bowl fragments, the first is decorated with lotuses and birds in the inner part, whereas the exterior has a conventional lotus pattern, on the second fragment are visible the remains of a lotus.⁷⁰ It decorates a goblet and a pilgrim flask both coming from Deir el-Balah,⁷¹ another ivory lotus-shaped chalice comes from the Palace of Level VIIA at Megiddo,⁷² where the lotus is also attested in association with palmette-motif on four ivory plaques.⁷³ Two additional purely Egyptian items come from the Timna rock-shrine, consisting in two faience counterpoises of a *menat*-necklace. The first bears a design of an open lotus flower with at least thirty petals emanating from the stamen, the second one is a bottom fragment decorated on both faces with an identical lotus pattern emanating from a central calyx, alternating with a quatrefoil of petals growing out from the same calyx.⁷⁴ Finally, examples in the glyptic are two steatite scarabs from Tell el-Ajjul bearing on their basis a three-stem lotus flower and a lotus flanked by buds respectively, with no other motifs.⁷⁵ In addition, it is also worth noting the coeval production of faience pendants in the shape of a lotus, which represent 17 per cent of the total number of floral pendants, particularly at Lachish and Beth-Shean.⁷⁶

However, despite this more limited number of occurrences, when this motif does appear in association with humans the lotus is the only flower held by the figures. Indeed, among the few examples of the period we can list a class of scarabs based on Middle Bronze prototypes, which bear the motif of a very schematic human figure holding a short stem of an over-sized lotus flower in association with the “*anra*” formula (fig. 3:12).⁷⁷ All the samples of this phenomenon can be dated to the Late Bronze IIB period, and have been found at Lachish, Beth-Shean, Dothan, Tell el-Far’ah (S) and Tell Jemmeh.⁷⁸

Moreover, the attestation of the lotus in association with divine images become more widespread, especially goddesses who are represented as holding one or two flowers on particularly prestigious materials, such as the splendid gold plaque from the Temple Level VI at Lachish.⁷⁹ Similar motifs are also reproduced on less expensive materials, such as ceramic plaque figurines from Tell Batash and Beth-Shemesh, and on a silver sheet pendant again from Lachish.⁸⁰ In all of these examples, the long-stemmed Egyptian lotus seems to have replaced the branch that previously flanked the naked goddess. However, it is interesting to consider another ceramic plaquette, which is stylistically close to the plaquettes depicting

⁷⁰ Tufnell 1940, pls. XXI:55; XXIII:64, 74.

⁷¹ Ben-Tor 2016, 94; Israel Museum IAA: N000334.

⁷² Schroer 2011, 266 kat. 811.

⁷³ Loud 1939, pl. 8:27-30.

⁷⁴ Rothenberg 1988, figs. 32:3, 33:7.

⁷⁵ Keel 1997, 174 n. 212, 249 n. 431.

⁷⁶ McGovern 1985, 45.

⁷⁷ The “*anra*” formula has been labelled after the hieroglyphs ‘*nr*’. This group is not attested on Middle Kingdom scarabs, but marks a Canaanite innovation inspired from Egyptian hieroglyphs. The signs are meaningless and probably had an apotropaic function for good luck (Ben-Tor 2009).

⁷⁸ Weissbein *et al.* 2019, 90, fig. 19; Keel 2010a, 204 n. 236, 492 n. 7; 2010b, 280 n. 587, 328 n. 704, 330 n. 706; 2013, 24 n. 55; Brandl 2009, 649, figs. 12-15.

⁷⁹ Ben-Tor 2016, 108; The Israel Museum IAA 1978-1; Cornelius 2008, pl. 5.22.

⁸⁰ Mazar - Panitz-Cohen 2019, 102, fig. 5.15; Ben-Tor 2016, 160, fig. 30; Cornelius 2008, pl. 5.35; Weissbein *et al.* 2019, 85, fig. 12.

naked frontal women, and which potentially testifies the transition of the lotus as an iconographic motif from the divine to the royal sphere. The item comes from Beth-Shemesh and dates to the 14th-13th century BCE (fig. 3:13). It represents a male figure positioning himself to the left in profile, with short hair, wearing a short kilt which is held by a belt. The figure's gesture with its V-shaped arms and short-stem lotus seems to suggest a divine nature, although there are no others noticeable attributes.⁸¹ It is in fact debated whether the figure is mortal or divine, yet among the various possibilities based on stylistic comparisons, it has also been put forward that it could be a female governess who chose to be depicted as a man, but who preserves the Qadesh gesture along with the floral attribute, considered as a symbol of kingship.⁸²

Despite the paucity of the examples of lotus motif in glyptic compared to the previous cultural phase, the plaque figurine from Beth-Shemesh appears to be iconographically connected to a coeval and limited local scarab production located at Beth-Shean, which developed in the Late Bronze Age IB-IIA (ca. 1450-1300 BCE). The "Beth-Shean Level IX Group" (fig. 3:14) is characterised by the production of scarabs in composite materials (instead of steatite) and the leftward direction of the motif, whereas on Egyptian scarabs they are always rightwards.⁸³ The scarabs ascribable to this workshop are widespread across the whole of the Southern Levant. Important for our discussion is a specific type depicting a man holding a lotus flower, which have been found, besides Beth-Shean, at Lachish, Taanach, Beth-Shemesh, Qubeibeh and Kefar Ara. Interestingly, all these examples depict the human figure facing left, as is also the case for the plaque figurine mentioned above, without any other clear attributes, such as the typical toga.⁸⁴ Within this group of scarabs, eight represent a man in upright stance holding a long-stem lotus flower, whereas on four the figure holding the plant is depicted as enthroned. Moreover, despite the evident Egyptian influence in the motif and the morphology of the scarab which were inspired by 18th dynasty prototypes, a standing or enthroned man holding a lotus-staff is a design for which no parallel can be found on New Kingdom Egyptian scarabs.⁸⁵ Despite the lack of other distinctive attributes, these enthroned male figures could well, in my view, be interpreted as sovereigns. A rather close parallel for this motif is represented by another scarab from Tell Jemmeh, whose design and orientation follow the Beth-Shean group, but which was probably meant to represent a pharaoh to judge from the presence of the crown and the *w*'s sceptre.⁸⁶ A further stylistic comparison for the enthroned figures can be found on a basalt statuette dated to the 15th-13th century BCE from Hazor, where, even though the lotus is absent, (along with any other attributes), nevertheless the male character has been interpreted as a ruler because he is depicted on a throne.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Ziffer - Bunimovitz - Lederman 2009, 338.

⁸² Ziffer - Bunimovitz - Lederman 2009, 339.

⁸³ The topic is extensively debated in Ben-Tor - Keel 2012.

⁸⁴ The figures wearing a toga have been identified as rulers on Canaanite scarabs since the Middle Bronze Age (Beck 2002, 79).

⁸⁵ Ben-Tor - Keel 2012, 93-94.

⁸⁶ However, the presence of the *w*'s sceptre could be due to a misunderstanding, for the pharaoh when enthroned holds the *hqt*-sceptre (Keel 2013, 64 n. 149).

⁸⁷ The Israel Museum IAA: 1995-1425.

Tentative, additional evidence for a similar employment of the motif may be represented by a lintel fragment from Beth-Shean, which shows a sitting man holding a lotus (fig. 3:15). Due to the nature of the motif carved on the chalk block, this piece had been originally considered part of a broken funerary stele, but later studies have proved that it was actually part of a lintel belonging to Building 1500, which was the prominent building of Beth-Shean Level VI dated to the reign of Ramesses III.⁸⁸ Although the piece is in a fragmentary condition, it is interesting to note the presence of a noble man, a ruler of the city, holding a lotus while sitting on a folding chair, which was only associated with the pharaoh or high officials,⁸⁹ but has been inserted into a residential and monumental context for public display, indicating an administrative and social function. Indeed, although the Egyptian nature of the relief is undeniable, its visual message appears to be somewhat contextualized in a Canaanite environment, insofar as the living ruler is shown receiving offerings or presiding over a banquet, rather than being linked to rebirth and connected notions of regeneration.

4. THE CANAANITE BANQUET-SCENE, THE LOTUS FLOWER AS ROYAL INSIGNIA AND ITS ICONOGRAPHIC INHERITANCE

This last consideration regarding the banquet leads us, finally, to the well-known and much-debated ivories depicting banquet scenes, which chronologically follow the Beth-Shean production, but which are coeval with the above-mentioned lintel from Building 1500. The ivories consist of four sequential plaques and an additional plaque from the Palace of Stratum VIIA at Megiddo,⁹⁰ while the third one consists in a fragmented panel found in room YC of the Residence YR at Tell el-Far'ah (S).⁹¹ The items are dated respectively to the 13th-12th century BCE, concerning their manufacturing, one of the two Megiddo ivories is carved in relief, whereas the second one and the Far'ah ivory are incised.⁹² All three ivories were decorative elements of a modest size, most likely belonging to a stool or chain frame and a piece of wooden furniture in the case of the Megiddo ivories, while the panel from Far'ah formed a strip affixed to a bed or the back of a throne.⁹³

Let us start the discussion with the Megiddo ivories. The first four sequential plaques represent similar scenes, which are respectively articulated on two plaques. The first two show a chariot battle, followed by a banquet. The chariot scene is very dynamic and consists of three sequential images of the same prince captured at different moments of the assault. The next scene takes us into the banquet that follows the battle. The ruler sits on a stool and is holding a cup and a lotus flower, the other diners sit on similar stools and also hold a cup (fig. 4:16). The figure of the ruler is actually not so distinguishable from the other figures, who are all male, and wear a long tunic and a headdress similar to the prince, who can be identified above all by the general orientation of the scene, which is towards him. The same theme appears on the other two plates, but in different ways. The chariot scene does not reproduce the charge, but rather the departure towards the battlefield. The plaque relating to

⁸⁸ Sweeney 1998; 2009.

⁸⁹ Sweeney 2009, 701.

⁹⁰ Loud 1939, pls. 4, 32; Novacek 2011, figs. 28, 8a-b; Ben-Tor 2016, 120-121; The Israel Museum IAA: 1938-780.

⁹¹ Ben-Tor 2016, 91; Fischer 2011, 347-348, figs. 20-21.

⁹² Liebowitz 1980, 162.

⁹³ Ben-Tor 2016, 91; Ziffer 2002, 17.

the banquet is unfortunately too worn to clearly distinguish the participants. One can recognise the ruler in a figure seated on a stool, in front of him other unrecognisable figures. In the right half, on the other hand, a series of figures carrying geese in their arms are clearly visible, other geese walk among them. Again, all figures are male. The general tone of the narratives is definitely Mesopotamian, the Egyptian iconographic components are in fact limited to the lotus flower.

The fifth plaque is fortunately intact and, compared to the previous ones, it stands out for the care of the inlays and the details of the narrative, which also includes more Egyptianizing elements such as the winged sun-disk, papyrus plants and birds. It is decorated with two incised scenes, on the right a triumphant Canaanite ruler returning from the battle, on the left the same prince is sitting on a cherubin throne while participating in a banquet in honour of his victory (fig. 4:17). Remarkably, this scene also includes the presence of women in the patriarchal system of rule, represented by a high-ranking woman followed by a female musician.⁹⁴

Egyptian influences become instead dominant in the last panel under discussion, which is composed of three large ivory inlays and was found in the destruction level of the Residence YR at Tell el-Far'(S). In fact, not only is the narrative of the scene unfolded around a characteristic "Nilotic" theme, but also the dignitary seated on a folding chair, his long robes, the other human figures as well as the subsidiary motifs find close parallels in New Kingdom tomb decorations as much as in minor arts.⁹⁵ A procession of three male figures is walking from the area of the marsh to a dry land while carrying the tied birds for the following banquet, the figures also carry a papyrus-like staff.⁹⁶ Similarly to the second banquet scene from Megiddo, a prince or a high official is depicted seated on a folding chair while holding a cup and a lotus flower, before him is again a female figure dressed in an elegant linen garment, possibly his wife (fig. 4:18). Behind the woman we also see two female musicians wearing a long dress with the addition of a nude female dancer.

The main *topos* of the panels from Megiddo is warlike in nature, and specifically a battle with chariots and the victorious return of the ruler with bound prisoners. Differently, the panel from Tell el-Far'ah (S) represents a bird-hunting scene in a papyrus marsh. All the scenes, however, end in a feast. These items represent the highest expression of Canaanite art and its hybrid features and have been extensively described in a number of publications.

They have been variously interpreted in the scholarly literature. Sometimes a more Egyptian interpretation prevailed, which led the character at the banquet to be regarded as an Egyptian dignitary, or still further the entire scenes have been taken to allude to unlikely Egyptian funerary practices.⁹⁷ However, other studies have recognized the Anatolian and Mesopotamian origin of the banquets depicted, asserting that Egyptian motifs lost their meaning in Canaan.⁹⁸ Moreover, mutual influences have also been recognized by developing the concept of "Hybrid Egyptian-Canaanite" or "Hybrid style art".⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Schroer 2011, 374 cat. n. 947.

⁹⁵ A good parallel is found on a metal bowl from Tanis (Ben-Shlomo 2010, fig. 3.44).

⁹⁶ These figures resemble the male figure carrying a papyrus-like staff present on an inlay from Ekron dated to the 11th century BCE, depicting a similar "Nilotic" scene (Ben-Shlomo 2010, fig. 3.47).

⁹⁷ Fischer 2011; Nataf 2011.

⁹⁸ Ziffer 2002; 2005; Liebowitz 1980.

⁹⁹ Bonatz 2000; Barnett 1982, 26; Ben-Shlomo 2010, 89-91.

Despite the unquestionable Egyptianizing elements present in the Megiddo examples, the topic of these scene has been largely recognized as oriental one, characteristic of Mesopotamia, since the “combination of military and feast is not Egyptian”.¹⁰⁰

A distinctly more Egyptian style dominates instead the composition of the panel from Tell el-Far’ah (S), where the seated character was indeed thought to be an Egyptian dignitary, rather than a local ruler.¹⁰¹ This identification was certainly also favoured by the very nature of the Residence YR which, among all the Late Bronze Age Palestinian residences, exhibits more common characteristics with the Egyptian residential architecture.¹⁰²

A more exhaustive description of the general narrative scenes would be superfluous here, but for the purposes of the present discussion I shall focus on the male enthroned figure and the lotus flower especially.

Being inserted into a banquet scene, we find in these compositions for the first time the imagery of the ruler finally codified with its symbolism, namely as an enthroned figure holding a cup in his right hand and a short-stem flower in his left one. As seems to me evident, the flower acts as a replacement of the ancient Near Eastern branch, which was understood as a pastor sceptre and which in the Canaanite adaptation is represented by the lotus. Such interpretation has been proposed by I. Ziffer, and is also shared by Ben-Shlomo,¹⁰³ whereas other scholars have also argued in favour of a Canaanite interpretation of the composition.¹⁰⁴ Conversely, E. Fischer argued that such identification of the flower as a replacement of the Mesopotamian sceptre is due to insufficient knowledge of similar Egyptian representations,¹⁰⁵ ultimately agreeing with the initial idea set out by Petrie.¹⁰⁶ Fischer carries out a detailed iconographic analysis, comparing similar banquet scenes found in Egyptian environment both on wall paintings and on certain architectural elements as well as in material culture, at the end of which she concludes that «*Die Kombination von Trinkschale und Lotosblüte, wie sie die Bankettszenen aus Megiddo und Tell el-Far'ah zeigen, ist ohne die oben genannten ägyptischen Parallelen kaum denkbar*».¹⁰⁷

Although the Egyptian contribution to these productions is irrefutable,¹⁰⁸ Fischer’s overall approach seems perhaps too constrained by Egyptian models, which might lead to simplistic conclusions. The bulk of comparisons she submits are in fact all originated in Egyptian private tombs, i.e. in environments where the valence of the lotus reflects the

¹⁰⁰ Liebowitz 1980, 167 note 19; Ziffer 2005, 150-151; Ben-Tor 2016, 119-122.

¹⁰¹ Fischer 2011, 205.

¹⁰² Nigro 1996, 40-41. Despite the similarities with Egyptian architecture, these residencies are a typical local feature inspired by Middle Bronze palatial models, with the infiltration of some Egyptian elements (Nigro 1996, 61-62).

¹⁰³ Ziffer 2005, 152-158; 2002, 19; Ben-Shlomo 2010, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Liebowitz stated «The motif of a seated man with a cup in his raised right hand and a lotus blossom in his raised left hand is indigenous to Palestine and Syria» (Liebowitz 1980, 168). Albeit without referring to the flower, Beck also recognised the seated figure of Tell el-Far’ah (S) as a local ruler (Beck 2002, 84). Finally, A. Ben-Tor also argued that this inlay had been locally executed (A. Ben-Tor 2009, 37).

¹⁰⁵ Fischer 2011, 91.

¹⁰⁶ Petrie argued that the whole subject of the ivory from Fara’ah is purely Egyptian, evidently for the Egyptian official living in the residence but in a Syrian workmanship (Petrie 1930, 19).

¹⁰⁷ Fischer 2011, 91.

¹⁰⁸ Regardless, Kantor recognized in the Far’ah’s ivory a general “un-Egyptian atmosphere” which led her to consider the piece a Levantine production (Kantor 1945, 719). Likewise, Ben-Shlomo argued that this inlay «suggests Canaanite workmanship with Egyptian motifs» (Ben-Shlomo 2010, 91).

specifically Nilotic concept of regeneration and rebirth. A more interesting insight certainly comes from comparisons with some lintels of private houses of the Ramesside period, depicting seated persons in antithetically composed scenes being served plants, drinks and food.¹⁰⁹ Regardless, from a closer look to the cited examples emerges how a seated figure holding a lotus flower is hardly recognizable, and this is true especially for the association flower-cup.¹¹⁰

These examples of banquet scenes on lintels of private houses in Egypt and Nubia anyway testify to the symbolic use of the lotus flower also in non-funeral contexts. The iconographic and thematic connection with Canaanite ivories and, above all, with the Far'ah example would therefore seem obvious. In my opinion, however, the iconographic comparison alone in this case is insufficient without fully considering the materiality of the examples under investigation and their socio-cultural context. Indeed, it is necessary to ask oneself through which channels certain Egyptian themes and narratives penetrated the Southern Levant. In this regard, with the exception of the above-mentioned architectural element from Beth-Shean and few other evidence, it should be stressed that there is currently no proof of Egyptian or Egyptianizing monumental art in the Southern Levant.¹¹¹ Instead, the main Canaanite vehicle for images and narratives is certainly found in the minor arts, that is, in scarabs and cylinder seals. As we have seen, in the case of scarabs the images transmitted concern primarily depictions reduced to figures bearing lotus of varying sizes and, as it has been noticed by O. Keel, while woman holding a lotus are probably of Egyptian origin, the men holding flowers seem to have been taken over from cylinder seal glyptic.¹¹² The other main topic transmitted through cylinder seals is instead the properly oriental banquet scenes.

Moreover, further clue comes from an evaluation of the entanglement between the material supports and the depicted scenes. Indeed, the preparation of carved ivories seems to be a speciality of Palestinian and Syrian workshop from the Chalcolithic period onwards, and they were particularly appreciated during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages as a symbol of affluence in public, ritual and domestic sphere.¹¹³ These peculiar media conveyed narrative

¹⁰⁹ Fischer 2011, 88.

¹¹⁰ In the example from Qantir (Fischer 2011, fig. 39) the seated figure is depicted while holding a cup only, on one lintel from Amara West (Budka 2001, fig. 71) this is depicted while holding a bowl, whereas in front of him there are women carrying papyrus. On another piece from Heliopolis, the royal correspondent Mai sits on a folding chair and is represented playing a board game on the left scene, while he is holding a cup in the right one. The flower appears in the first scene where also a woman is depicted in front of him handing a lotus bouquet (Fischer 2011, fig. 38). An additional lintel from Medinet Habu (Hölscher 1954, pl. 6:B) represents a couple while receiving a bouquet of flowers from a woman. The lintel of *Nb-ms* depicts him in two antithetical scenes while holding a cup and a lotus flower respectively, but not in the same scene (Bierbrier 1982, 40, pl. 93). Finally, on a broken lintel from a doorway of the official residence at Dorginarti (Knudstad 1966, 182, pl. 23:A) we can see two scenes depicting a seated couple, the scene on the right is incomplete, and one can recognise the man holding a sort of tall glass, behind him is his wife holding a similar vessel and a flower in her left hand. In the left scene the man is shown with a flower over his head while holding a cup and another flower, his wife sits behind him in the same pose, before them is a girl, possibly their daughter, holding a cup (according to Budka is a loaf of bread, see Budka 2001, 191 n. 171) and flowers over a small table.

¹¹¹ Other similar examples can be a stela of Seti I, a stela of Ramesses II, a statue of Ramesses III and two papyrus-shaped capitals all recovered at Beth-Shean, the remains of a gateway façade of Ramesses II at Jaffa, and the Egyptianizing stela from el-Bālū'.

¹¹² Keel 1995, 204 § 562.

¹¹³ Ben-Shlomo - Dotham 2006, 1-31; A. Ben-Tor 2009, 36.

scenes which were depicted in monumental art in Egypt and Assyria, and are capable of “illustrating the idiosyncrasies of Canaanite workmen in some detail”.¹¹⁴ The choice of small-scale carved ivories for domestic use is in fact on a different iconographic and cultural level from the more monumental scenes observed in Egypt, moreover, the complete absence of any hieroglyphic sign would be quite inconceivable in case of the depiction of an Egyptian official. On an iconographic background, a final remark on the Fara’ah ivory concerns the visual hybridization of the lotus flower which, as Fischer herself admits, exhibits features typical of the papyrus plant,¹¹⁵ to the point that it was in fact interpreted as such by Kantor.¹¹⁶ Such characteristic seems reminiscent to the depictions of scarabs where the interpretation of the flower is often unclear, as well as the mere difference between sceptre and flower.

A final consideration can be made concerning the general theme and aims of the banquets depicted on these ivories. Feasts, as central social events in the ancient Near East, have been theorized as a way to maintain the social hierarchy.¹¹⁷ In this view, feasts that intend to acquire status need the presence of an audience which can be either human or divine.¹¹⁸ In this theoretical frame the compositions of the Megiddo ivories, as well as the later sarcophagus of the deceased king Ahiram of Byblos, largely follow the pattern of the “audience scene”.¹¹⁹ Indeed, this seems to be the general tone that unifies all our examples, more so than the familiar and private one found on Egyptian lintels. For all these observations, I would be inclined to lean towards the interpretation put forward by I. Ziffer, and to see in the lotus a sign of royalty.

Such a flower appears to be offered to the ruler by the person standing in front of him, who is usually identified as his wife or as a priestess.¹²⁰ The handing-over of the lotus flower is to be interpreted as a ritual act, which stands for blessing and prosperity as ensured by the victory of the ruler.¹²¹ Further, the act of smelling the lotus might refer to the receiving of life, while the proffering of the lotus can be interpreted as the bestowing of life.¹²² All scenes indeed appear to be imbued with ritual aspects, conveying well-being, festive wealth and joy at the royal court.

In this image we witness the gradual decontextualization of the lotus flower motif from its Egyptian funerary setting down to its Canaanite decoding as a symbol of royalty and, at the same time, the retention of its Egyptian association of prosperity, long life and immortality, and closeness to the figure of the ruler. The extensive use of the lotus and its metaphorical status as an icon of kingship seems to become well established throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East during the I mill. BCE (fig. 1:1), perhaps also because its colour was reminiscent of the blue of lapis-lazuli.¹²³ In the Levant the lotus-sceptre appears on an Iron Age IIB scarab from Beth-Shean (ca. 840-700 BCE) depicting a

¹¹⁴ Kantor 1945, 719.

¹¹⁵ Fischer 2011, 127-128, 197.

¹¹⁶ Kantor 1945, 721.

¹¹⁷ Fu - Altmann 2014, 21.

¹¹⁸ Fu - Altmann 2014, 22.

¹¹⁹ Adam 2014, 243.

¹²⁰ Ben-Tor 2016, 91-121; Schmitt 2001, 46.

¹²¹ Schmitt 2001, 46.

¹²² Van Loon 1986, 250.

¹²³ Tursi 2021.

striding figure with toga and long-stem lotus, as well as on a wall painting from Kuntillet 'Ajrud.¹²⁴ On a three-sided ivory furniture implement from Zincirli the lotus is held by striding figures, while it is beautifully depicted in a royal context on the Barrakin's orthostat and on a stela, both of which come from Zincirli.¹²⁵ The same association lotus - cup held by and enthroned ruler is also found in the golden bowl of Iabâ, found in the royal tombs of Nimrud dated to the 8th century but probably ascribable to the 10th century and produced in a Levantine workshop.¹²⁶

The motif is also found in funerary banquet scenes referring to the deceased sovereign, as in the well-known and already mentioned Ahrām's sarcophagus from Byblos and on two funerary stelae from Sam'a and from Gözlühüyük - İslahiye respectively, which scenes are based on these Canaanite prototypes.¹²⁷

During the Iron Age we can securely recognize the systematic use of the lotus motif as royal insignia on 9th-8th century Neo-Hittite reliefs, and it is stated to appear through western influence as well as on Neo-Assyrian reliefs and wall paintings from the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-729 BCE).¹²⁸ The motif was then extensively used by Sargon II.¹²⁹ As for the Assyrian environment, it has been interestingly noted that on bas-reliefs the lotus appears alone in the left hand of the king exclusively when he is depicted in the presence of foreign tribute-bearers, performing the blessing gesture; conversely, the king always appears with the long staff only in the presence of parades composed of court members.¹³⁰ The peculiar iconographic context of the lotus motif, which is held by the Assyrian king in the presence of western tribute-bearers, has been intriguingly interpreted as a reflection of political and ideological propaganda promoted by Sargon II in order to blend together traditional Assyrian forms with the western symbolic traditions, and therefore represent a kind of "cultural bridge" between east and west.¹³¹

5. CONCLUSION

The iconographic interchangeability between tree, branch and sceptre has a long tradition in Near Eastern art, where it was linked to kingship as attested in a number of banquet scenes. This symbolic convention extended to the Levant during the Middle Bronze Age, and therefrom to some Egyptian floral motifs that spread through scarabs, specifically the lotus that was the most common flower associated with human and divine figures. Syro-Palestinian glyptic of the period testifies to the presence of anthropomorphic figures holding a floral sceptre, which may resemble rather a palm branch or a flower as the case may be; some of these figures can also be identified as kings or even pharaohs. In the second half of the II mill. in the Southern Levant, the palm branch and the floral sceptre are finally replaced by the Egyptian lotus flower, which appears to be regularly associated with rulers to the point

¹²⁴ For the scarab see Keel 2010a, 114 n. 38; the wall painting is found in Beck 2002, 153, fig. 23.

¹²⁵ Winter 1981, pl. XVIIa; Seidl 2000, 95, figs. 5a-b; Winter 1976, fig. 17.

¹²⁶ Wicke - Busch - Fischer 2010.

¹²⁷ Bonatz 2001, 169, figs. 9, 11-12.

¹²⁸ Van Loon 1986, 246.

¹²⁹ Portuese 2018, 104. The lotus held by the king is also regularly attested under Assurbanipal and Shalmaneser (see Winter 1976, figs. 6-16).

¹³⁰ Portuese 2018, 103-104.

¹³¹ Portuese 2018, 107-109.

that it became the conventional flower in throne scenes. Initial attestations of this convention can be found in the Beth-Shean Level IX Group scarabs, which depict enthroned figures holding the lotus. Such an artistic custom has its debut in the ivories depicting banquet scenes, where the figures can be safely identified as rulers. Possibly, the development of the Canaanite banquet scenes is part of a tradition influenced by northern ideologies which affected more directly the Megiddo ivories, where the iconography is more faithful to Syro-Anatolian models. By contrast, the panel from Tell el-Far'ah (S) found at the southernmost limit of Canaan shows a greater familiarity with the Egyptian symbolic world. This may also be due to the fragmentary nature of the Canaanite cultural landscape, within which regional micro-entities could present artistic differences. A final remark is concerned with the feast and its relationship to the rulers. In Canaan, the depiction of banquet scenes themselves may convey important socio-religious messages. Indeed, Canaanite cultic spaces functioned primarily as venues for hosting feasts and commensal meals, and these spaces were controlled by elites who also employed iconography to buttress their status within society.¹³²

Ultimately, what emerges from this analysis is a general re-evaluation of the Egypto-Canaanite interactions, according to which the Levantine culture is no longer simply a passive and receptive component towards the great kingdoms of its time. Indeed, the nature of the Egyptian interest in Canaan and its control has largely produced, in the previous scholarship, models for imperialism and colonialism,¹³³ or, conversely, has favoured concepts of indirect rule and elite emulation models.¹³⁴

What I would like to stress, is instead the potential creative power of the Levantine area theorized as a “liminal space”, i.e. a space of encounter characterized by migrant communities where processes of entanglement particularly were triggered. In the case of the Southern Levant, the phenomenon was also likely to take place regionally, for example at specific coastal sites, ports, or delimited areas,¹³⁵ as might have been the case of Megiddo, Tell el-Far'ah (S) and Beth-Shean which acted as satellite-sites for the surrounding areas. In certain contexts, collective iconography seems indeed to be able to take different declinations.

To conclude, this study hopefully demonstrates how the Southern Levant was a source of artistic creativity, which agency was also able to shape and influence the neighbouring civilizations and their different forms of cultural and artistic expression.

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¹³² Susnow 2021, 222-223.

¹³³ Helck 1971; Oren 1984; Redford 1992; Hasel 1998.

¹³⁴ Higginbotham 2000.

¹³⁵ Stockhammer ed. 2012, 4-54.

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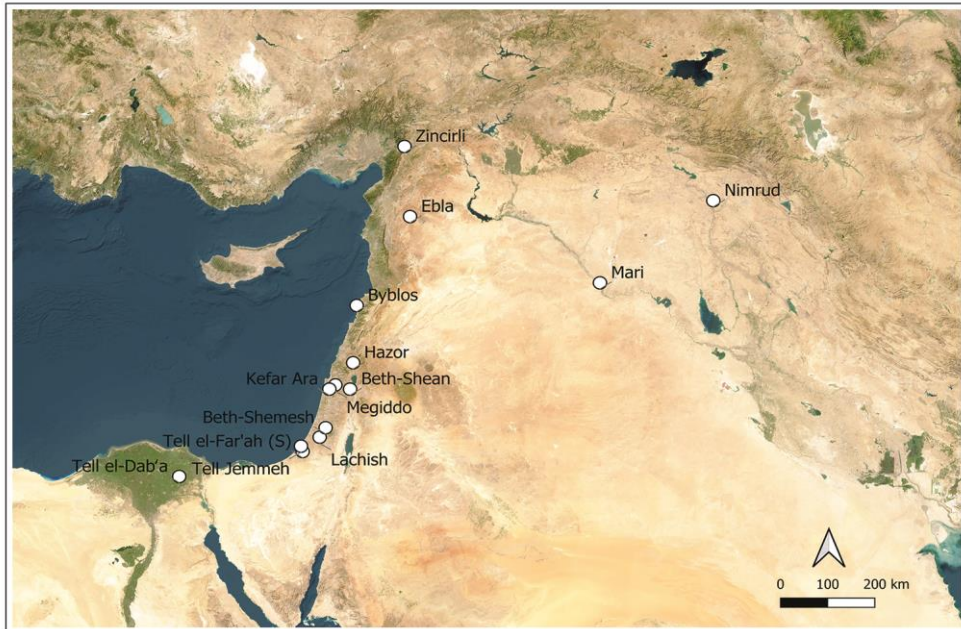
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3



4

Fig. 1 - 1, map showing some of the main sites mentioned in the text (source: Qgis); 2, stela “*Akh iker en Ra*” of Uebekhet (drawn by the author after Museo Egizio Torino, Cat. 1542); 3, Old Kingdom stamp seal depicting a seated girl holding a lotus flower (drawn by the author after Wiese 1996, pl. 14:270); 4, 13th-15th Dyn. Scarab (drawn by the author after Petrie 1925, pl. XIV:941).

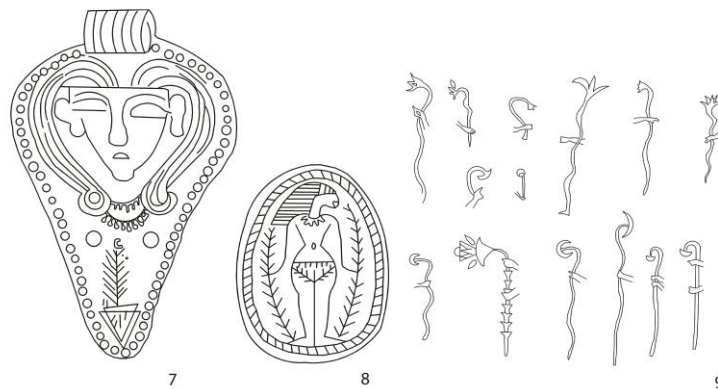
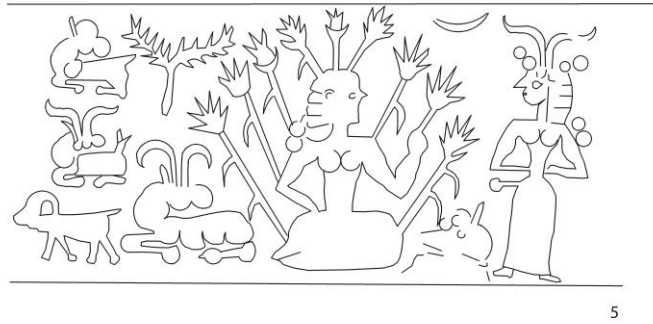


Fig. 2 - 5, cylinder seal from Shadad (drawn by the author after Keel - Schroer 2015, fig. 18); 6, cylinder seal from Šuruppak, early III mill. (drawn by the author after Amiet 1980, pl. 89:1168); 7, Middle Bronze metal pendant from Ugarit displaying a female head with branch growing out of the pudenda (drawn by the author after Keel 1998, fig. 18); 8, scarab from Gezer depicting a naked goddess flanked by branches (drawn by the author after Keel 1998, fig. 26); 9, examples of floral sceptres attested on Middle Bronze Syro-Palestinian cylinder seals (drawn by the author after Teissier 1996, 162-163).

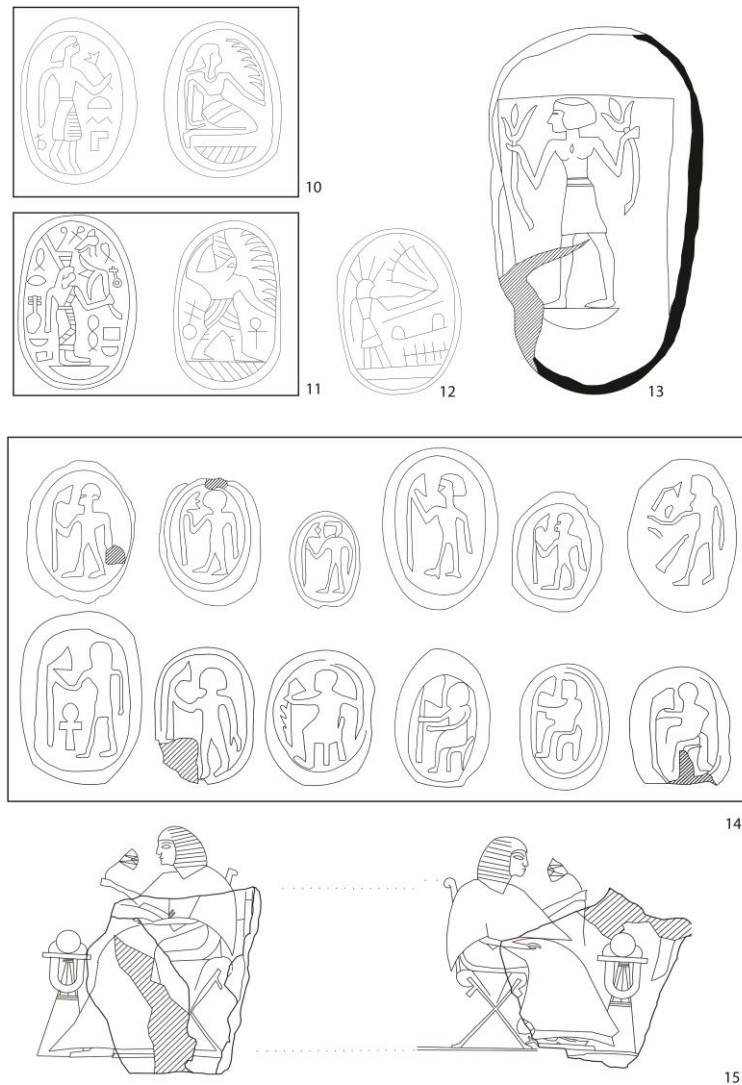


Fig. 3 - 10, scarabs of the early Palestinian series (drawn by the author after Ben-Tor 2007, pl. 63:5-23); 11, scarabs of the late Palestinian series (drawn by the author after Ben-Tor 2007, pls. 102:14, 103:12); 12, scarab with big lotus and “*anra*” sequence from Tell el-Far’ah (S) (drawn by the author after Keel 2010b, 281 n. 587); 13, plaque figurine from Tel Beth-Shemesh (drawn by the author after Ziffer - Bunimovitz - Lederman 2009, 334, pl. 1); 14, scarabs of the Beth-Shean Level IX Group (drawn by the author after Ben-Tor - Keel 2012, figs. 2-3, 15-16, 18, 20, 29, 33; Keel 2010a, 159 nos. 136-138; 2013, 563 n. 3; 2017, 573 n. 32); 15, tentative reconstruction of the lintel from Building 1500 at Beth-Shean (Tursi 2021, fig. 4).



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18

Fig. 4 - 16, detail of the banquet scene inserted in the battle with chariot, from Megiddo (drawn by the author after Loud 1939, pl. 32, c); 17, detail of the banquet scene after the return from the battle, from Megiddo (drawn by the author after Loud 1939, pl. 4:2b); 18, detail of the banquet scene from Tell el-Far'ah (S) (drawn by the author after Fischer 2011, 350, fig. 23b).