

Elite Emulation and Patronage Relationships in the Middle Bronze: The Egyptianized Dynasty of Byblos

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The paper maintains that the adoption of Egyptianized language, administrative titles and religious traits by the rulers of Byblos in the Middle Bronze Age should be seen as an elite emulation practice. It proposes that the underlying reasons for embracing such practices are related to the existence of patronage inter-elite bonds in the northern Levant and the Euphrates area. The author argues that the Egyptianized features adopted by the Byblos rulers were a means of differentiating themselves from other local rulers and of garnering prestige from their association with the highly-valuated Egyptian elite—a relationship that dated from the early Old Kingdom and that was based mainly on the exchange of prestige goods.

KEYWORDS Byblos, Egypt, Elite emulation, Patronage, Middle Bronze Age

Between 1922 and 1923, a group of nine royal tombs was found in Byblos. According to Montet (1927: 85), three of these tombs (Nos. I, II and III) were intact at the time of discovery, Tomb IV was plundered in modern times and the remaining five tombs were robbed in antiquity. The evidence found in the tombs shows that the Middle Bronze rulers of Byblos had adopted certain Egyptian titles (e.g., *ḥ3tj*-^c ‘high official’) and the Egyptian language and writing system, among other cultural features mainly related to Egyptian kingship.¹ Traditionally, this evidence led to the conclusion that Byblos had

¹ The evidence comes primarily from Tombs I, II and IV. There is controversy over the absolute dating of these tombs. Recently Kopetzky compared the pottery found in the tombs to that of Tell el-Dab’a (paper presented at 4th ICAANE 2004, ‘Stratigraphie comparée. Tell el-Dab’a and the Royal Tombs I–III of Byblos, New Chronological Evidences’; cf. also Kopetzky 2008: 225; Lilyquist 1993: 41–44) and proposed lowering their dates. Nigro (2009: 169) established parallels between Byblos and Ebla and concluded that “the Byblos synchronism and its Eblaite counterpart do not automatically support Low Chronology and may still be valid in a Middle Chronology system”. In this paper I maintain the traditional dates. Thus, Tombs I to IV are

been under Egyptian control and its rulers had been Egyptian ‘governors’—e.g., Montet (1928: 92), who characterized Byblos as a “petite Egypte” (see also Albright 1964: 42; 1966: 29; Helck 1971: 64; Givon 1987: 27). Others (Ward 1961: 134–137; Liverani 1995: 13–19) claimed that the relationship was peaceful and commercial without any kind of Egyptian dominion. In recent years Redford, Ryholt and Ben-Tor returned to this subject. Redford (1992: 97) questioned whether the rulers of Byblos received the title *ḥ3tj-^c* directly from the Egyptian king and visited Egypt to pay him homage once a year or if they adopted the Egyptian title as “the closest equivalent to a native title”. Ryholt suggested that “there is some indication that Byblos was *de facto* autonomous, although it officially saw itself as an Egyptian domain” (1997: 88) and emphasized that the rulers of Byblos “regarded themselves officially as subordinates of the Egyptian king” (*ibid.*: 87). Ben-Tor brought into the discussion a group of six private-name scarabs published long ago (Martin 1971: Nos. 261–263; 105; 810 and 1689; also 1968: 141–142; 1969: 81–83; 1996: 595–599; Newberry 1928: 109; 1933: 54 and Pl. X) and a new one in a private collection (Ben-Tor 2007: 178). The scarabs have the inscription *ḥ3tj-^c n Kpn*, ‘high official of Byblos’, followed by West-Semitic names commonly attributed to the Middle Bronze rulers of Byblos. One of the scarabs presents the so-called *ḥtp dj nsw* formula, *ḥtp dj nsw Ḥthr nbt n Kpn ḥ3tj-^c n Kpn K3jn*, “offering the king gives [to] Hathor, lady of Byblos, the high official of Byblos, Kain”.² Following the style and design of the scarabs (since their provenance is unknown) Ben-Tor argues that they should be dated to the late Middle Kingdom (Thirteenth Dynasty). In her opinion, four of them were produced in a royal workshop located at the residence at Iti-tawy (two mentioning *Intn* [Iantin], one *Ibshemw* [Abishemu] and one *Kain* [contra Ryholt 1997: 89]), while two came from an early scarab workshop located at Tell el-Dab’a (Mlinar 2004) and mention *Intn* and *Rynty* respectively.³ For one scarab (Martin 1971: No. 263) there is no record of its design and features (Ben-Tor 2007: 180).

According to Ben-Tor, this evidence proves that the title was given to the foreign rulers of Byblos by the Egyptian king. Due to certain particularities in the remaining evidence, however, such as the enclosing of names of rulers in cartouches—“an act

deemed contemporary with the late Middle Kingdom while Tombs VI to IX date to the early Second Intermediate Period (cf. Ben-Tor 2007: 181 and bibliography cited there). The famous sarcophagus of Ahiram was found in Tomb V. It probably dates to the Iron II (for a discussion, see Sass 2005: 17–22). With regard to the absolute chronology of the Middle Kingdom, at present there is a consensus that sets its termination in the early 17th century BCE—during the reign of Thirteenth Dynasty King Merneferre Ay (dates for this reign: ca. 1701–1677 BCE, Ryholt 1997: 408; ca. 1695–1685 BCE; cf. Bourriau 2003: 172). Regarding relative chronology, the end of the Middle Kingdom coincides with the end of the Levantine MBIIA (MBI) at Tell el-Dab’a. The transition between MBIIA (MBI) and MBIIIB (MBII) is dated ca. 1710–1680 BCE; while the end of MBIIIB (MBIII) is established ca. 1580 BCE (Bietak 2002: 31, Fig. 2). It is worth mentioning that Ryholt (1997: 293) includes the Thirteenth Dynasty in full in the Second Intermediate Period, (but cf. Ben-Tor, Allen and Allen 1999).

² I prefer Martin’s translation (1996: 597) to Ben-Tor’s (2007: 177). Ben-Tor reads the sign *k3* as “[*n*] *k3* [*n*], ‘for the ka of’ the high official *In* (or *Intn*), and not as a part of the name of the high official.

³ It is worth mentioning that the association of the names in these scarabs with those of the rulers buried in Tombs I (probably Abishemu) and IV (probably Iantin) remains speculative.

showing an attempt to adopt equivalent royal symbols, which was unthinkable in the case of Egyptian officials”—she is cautious in her conclusions (Ben-Tor 2007: 179). But if her argument is well-founded, it opens new hypotheses not only regarding the role of Tell el-Dabʿa and its relationships with the Egyptian residence on the one hand and with Byblos on the other during the late Middle Kingdom, but also regarding the Egyptian sociopolitical concept of relationships with foreign rulers and its differences from the Byblite one (cf. Ben-Tor 2007: 179, n. 15). In any case, caution is called for here and I prefer to await the appearance of contextualized evidence in support of Ben-Tor’s hypothesis. At present, most of the evidence—despite its controversial nature—points in a different direction.

For example, rulers of Byblos are mentioned in documents found at Mari and Drehem. One ruler, Yantinʿaamu—identified hypothetically with Iantin, who probably owned Tomb IV—is mentioned in the Mari royal archive as negotiating economic arrangements with Zimri-lim. He is addressed as *Lugal*, ‘king’ (Albright 1945; Kitchen 1967). Another *lugal* of Byblos is mentioned in a text from Drehem (Sollberger 1959–1960: 120–122). Possibly, if these rulers had been subordinated to the Egyptian king, they would not have been empowered to make their own arrangements. Thus, this evidence sheds light on their independence from Egypt.

At the same time, however, Egyptian textual evidence indicates that foreign rulers were commonly addressed as *ḥqʒ n GN*, ‘ruler of GN.’⁴ The title ‘ruler’ appears in the Execration Texts (Sethe 1926; Posener 1940; Koenig 1990); in the inscriptions of Sinai, where the “brother of the ruler of Retjenu, Khebdeḏ” is mentioned and depicted (Gardiner, Peet and Černý 1952: Pls. 85, 39, 51, Stela 163); and in a fragment of amethyst scarab found in a tomb of an Asiatic⁵ dignitary at Tell el-Dabʿa (Area F/I, Stratum d/1; early Thirteenth Dynasty), where a tentative reconstruction made by Martin proposes that it should be read, “[the ruler of (?) R]etjenu, Di-Sobekhemhat” (Martin 1998: 110). “Ruler of Retjenu” is also the title of Aamunenshi in the Tale of Sinuhe, the literary source known from Middle Kingdom times (Blackman 1932). Aamunenshi was the Asiatic ruler who hosted and protected Sinuhe after his flight from Egypt. As is well known, Greek ‘Hyksos’ is itself rooted in Egyptian *ḥqʒ ḥʒswt*, ‘ruler of the foreign countries’, borne by the Hyksos kings (e.g., Bietak 1996: 66). The Inscription of Khnumhotep (III) also refers to a ‘ruler of Byblos’ (Allen 2008: 33); and the title *ḥqʒ ḥʒst Jbʒʒ*, ‘ruler of the foreign country, Abisha’, appears in the tomb of his father at Beni Hassan (Newberry 1893: Pl. XXXI). Indeed, most of the evidence from Egypt points to regular use by Byblos rulers of the title, *ḥʒtj-ḥ* outside Egypt while the Egyptians commonly called the Asiatic foreign rulers ‘*ḥqʒ*’.

⁴ Another Egyptian title addressed to foreign rulers was *wr*, ‘great (ruler)’ but its use in the Middle Kingdom seems to be less frequent than *ḥqʒ*. It appears twice in the “Asiatic” section of the Execration Texts (Posener 1940: 88, 93).

⁵ As Schiestedt correctly states, “the term ‘Asiatic’ is used in Egyptology for non-Egyptian people of Near-Eastern origin” (2008: 243, n. 1).

The socio-historical situation

The close, long-term relationship between Egypt and Byblos was immersed in a network of bonds mainly based on the exchange of prestige goods. This latter network can be considered as part of a world-system, i.e., an “intersocietal network...in which the interaction (trade/warfare/intermarriage, etc.) is an important condition of the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affects changes which occur in these local structures” (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1993: 855). The use of this theoretical framework to explain ancient historical situations implies a deep revision of the original theory of Wallerstein (1974), rather than an automatic application of the categories and concepts generated to explain the emergence of capitalism in the Western world.⁶ However, world-system theory has certain advantages in defining the roles that the interacting societies played in the relationship as well as in evaluating the impact such a linkage exerted at a local level. The unit of analysis is the world-system itself and not a particular society.

Undoubtedly, from earliest times on, the main axis of economic and social connections in northeast Africa was the Nile. Starting in inland Africa, this axis reached the Levant from the eastern Delta through a sea route and a land route. Of course, not only did this axis connect regions, it also engaged different social groups in an extensive network of relationships. Taking into account the importance of this axis of interconnection, a Nilotic–Levantine world-system can be delineated at least until the mid-2nd millennium BCE, when the emergence of the Hyksos kingdom in the eastern Delta and the Kerman advance over Lower Nubia changed the socio-political scenario and reformulated the status of the former partners. Despite the fact that during the Middle Kingdom none of the interacting polities (mainly Kerma, Byblos and Egypt itself) exerted any kind of long-term control over the others, certain practices that originated in Egypt were adopted by the other partners involved in the direct relationship (Flammini 2008: 52; *in press*). Thus, the adoption of Egyptian culture-related features by the elite of Byblos should be considered in the wider context of the running of the Nilotic–Levantine world-system during the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE. With regard to Kerma, the sealings uncovered near the harbour quarter and the entrance to the town should most likely be dated to Middle Kerma, contemporary with the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (Bonnet 2001: 31). The adoption of such a sealing system also points to a linkage with Egypt, probably related to the exchange with the Egyptian fortresses in Lower Nubia (Smith 1998). At present, there are no elements to prove that the Kerman elite adopted emulation practices during the Middle Kerma phase.

⁶ A critical approach to this theory may be found in Schneider 1977. Further reading on the discussions regarding the applicability of the world-systems model to the ancient Near East (selected papers): Kohl 1987; Rowlands 1987; Frank and Gills 1996; Stein 1999.

Discussion: The Egyptianized features of the Byblos elite as elite emulation

The Byblos–Egypt connection

The evidence from Byblos is indecisive regarding the absolute chronology for the tombs or of the precise list of the rulers. It does, however, reveal a long though intermittent relationship with Egypt. Byblos maintained a close connection with the Egyptian state at least from the early Old Kingdom (Prag 1986; Ben-Tor 1991: 4). Many objects inscribed with the names of Egyptian kings of the Third to the Sixth Dynasties were found there. A hiatus in the First Intermediate Period followed, and contact was reestablished in the Middle Kingdom. Another hiatus probably occurred during the Second Intermediate Period: the latest Egyptian import is a royal-name scarab of the Thirteenth Dynasty king, Ibiaw Wahibre, the predecessor of Merneferre Ay. The Byblos–Egypt relationship was then resumed at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Lilyquist 1993: 44; Ben-Tor 2007: 182).

The material remains linked to the relation between the Twelfth Dynasty and the elite of Byblos are strongly associated with Ammenemes III (ca. 1831–1786 BCE) and his successors, despite the fact that a recently published inscription provides some clues about this relationship during the reign of Sesostri III (ca. 1870–1831 BCE) (Allen 2008: 37). The Byblos evidence⁷—several Egyptian luxury items found in the royal tombs—as well as the Egypt evidence, point to a resumption of the relationship in the late rather than the early Middle Kingdom (Marcus 2007: 173).

Discourse at an ideological level

The inscription of Khnumhotep (III) has substantially increased the evidence emerging from Egypt. Despite its fragmentary state, the Annals of Ammenemes II, also known as the Mit Rahina Inscription (Altenmüller and Moussa 1991; Marcus 2007), is one of the most relevant sources for the relationship between Egypt and the northern Levant during the Middle Kingdom. The text refers to an incident between the Syrian cities of Byblos and Ullaza and the active role played by the Egyptian king in solving the problem. It provides relevant information to my argument: the ruler of Byblos is called ‘this ruler (*hq3*) of Byblos, the king (the Malku, *m3kj*)’. Allen translates the word *m3kj* as a title and not as a name, suggesting that it was the Egyptian translation of the Semitic word for king (Allen 2008: 33). The determinative of this word—a kneeling Asiatic with his hands tied behind his back—does not allow automatic inference of Egyptian domination but rather refers to the role of foreign rulers in the discourse at an ideological level. They were enemies, bearers of chaos, individuals to be defeated by the Egyptian king. In fact, there is no evidence to

⁷ A gold and obsidian ointment container inscribed with the name of Ammenemes III (Montet 1928: No. 610) was found in Tomb I, which probably belonged to a ruler named Abishemu. This tomb was connected through a passageway to another tomb, probably of Abishemu’s son, Yapishemuabi. In this second tomb, Montet found a small Egyptian obsidian and gold box with the name of Ammenemes IV and a grey stone vase with an inscription mentioning the ‘son of Re Amenemhat’ enclosed in a cartouche (Montet 1928: Nos. 611, 614). These objects date Tombs I and II to the late Twelfth Dynasty.

affirm the existence of Egyptian long-term control over Byblos, for a chain of fortresses such as those built in Lower Nubia, or for Egyptian settlements in the northern Levant during the MBIIA. (The inscription relates that the ruler of Byblos allowed the Egyptians to moor their ships in the harbour, however.) The acquisition of Egyptian culture-related features by the rulers of Byblos must be explained in another way.

Emulating the elite

Higginbotham (1996, 2000; see also Killebrew 2005: 53–54) presented a model for interpreting Egyptian-style finds from Ramesside Palestine. Traditionally, the Egyptian-style evidence had been considered a reflection of Egyptian dominion over Palestine during that period. Higginbotham proposed that it indicated elite emulation. She suggested that the evidence pointed to the establishment of relationships between low-prestige elites with powerful and prestigious centres. “[B]y linking themselves to such centers”, she maintained, “local rulers are often able to enhance their own stature and authority” (Higginbotham 1996: 155). She discarded any links of domination between those interacting elites (1996: 159). According to her model:

- (1) The Egyptian-style finds from the Levant were expected to be much more restricted in variety than those found in the Nile Valley;
- (2) They consisted primarily of prestige goods rather than domestic artefacts;
- (3) They included hybrid Egyptian-Levantine types;
- (4) No Egyptian settlements or pure Egyptian contexts were found in the Levant;
- (5) Egyptian-style material appeared primarily in funerary or ritual contexts;
- (6) The relative quantity of Egyptian-style artefacts were expected to decline gradually as the distance from Egypt increased.

Evaluation of MB Byblos according to the above variables enables us to assess the validity of the proposed emulation elite process.

Variable 1: The evidence at Byblos indicates a *selection* of certain cultural features and not a complete appropriation of all of them. For instance, the objects found in Tombs I, II, IV and IX point to the frequent use by their owners of the Egyptian title *ḥ3tj-ꜥ*, ‘high official’. A fragment of a bas-relief from the Temple of the Obelisks (the so-called Egyptian Temple) at Byblos shows a figure paying homage to royal names within a two-column Egyptian inscription written in hieroglyphs. The identification of the royal name in one column, enclosed in a cartouche (Dunand 1939: 197–198, No. 3065), is disputed; some scholars (e.g., Ryholt 1997: 87) read here the nomen and prenomen of the Thirteenth Dynasty king Neferhotep I.⁸ The other column not only mentions two rulers of Byblos, Iantin and his father, as ‘high officials’, but also refers to the Egyptian god Re-Harakhte in a non-Egyptian-style formula (Chehab 1969: 27). These data lead to the supposition that the figure was the ruler of Byblos, Iantin, and that he was paying homage to the Egyptian king.

⁸ A cylinder-seal probably also carries the name of a Byblite ruler—the title is lost—and a king of the Thirteenth Dynasty, Sehetepibre. It also bears a restored dedication to Hathor, “the lady of [Byblos]” (Albright 1945: 11; Ryholt 1997: 87). Unfortunately the provenance of this cylinder-seal is unknown.

A study of faience fragments from Tomb I (Schiestl 2007) revealed that they originated from an Egyptian-style coffin probably adapted to local requirements. In addition, a fragment of an alabaster vessel found in Tomb IV had an inscription that could have been part of an offering formula. There, the title *h3tj-^c* is written together with the Egyptian title *jrj-p^ct*, ‘member of the elite’ and probably a local title, *hq3 hq3w*, ‘ruler of rulers’ (Montet 1928: No. 787; Redford 1992: 97). The selective appropriation of certain Egyptian cultural traits by the elite of Byblos is supported by this evidence.

Variable 2: The objects consisted primarily of prestige goods such as pectorals, pendants, bracelets and rings and on another level exhibited the use of the likewise prestigious Egyptian hieroglyphs, language and titles.

Variable 3: Hybrid objects are represented, for example, by the aforementioned vestiges of an Egyptian-style coffin, while the Syrian bronze and gold scimitar found in Tomb II (Montet 1928: No. 653) has the name of Yapishemuabi and his father as the ‘high officials’ of Byblos written in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Both were made locally as was a shell-shaped gold pendant also found in Tomb II (Montet 1928: No. 618). The pendant is decorated in Egyptian-style motifs and has a cartouche with the name of the ruler of Byblos—an obvious usurpation of a Pharaonic prerogative.⁹

Variable 4: The absence of Egyptian settlements or pure Egyptian contexts in the Levant. Indeed, the Egyptian(ized) objects occurred in association with artefacts of local type.

Variable 5: The Egyptian-style artefacts appear in Byblos primarily in funerary and ritual contexts.

Variable 6: The adoption of Egyptian cultural features seems to have been quite widespread in the Levant: A scaraboid from Sidon found in an urban occupation level was dated to the end of the Twelfth/beginning of the Thirteenth Dynasty; it bears a legend written in Egyptian hieroglyphs in two columns, but the object was locally made (Loffet 2006: 80). Two scarabs were found in children’s tombs, and two others in domestic contexts. Three of these scarabs were dated to the late Middle Kingdom and only one to the Second Intermediate Period (Loffet 2003). Furthermore, Egyptianized cylinder seals were found at various sites in the Levant, but only some of them in datable contexts. Collon (1986: 63) attributed them to what she described as ‘Green Jasper Workshop’, located at Byblos and dated to the early 2nd millennium BCE. A cylinder-seal impression from Alalakh (No. 194) was attributed by Teissier (1990: 67) to this workshop. It carries the formula *h3tj-^c n GN* (Collon 1975: 103; Teissier 1990; Málek 1996). Recently, Wimmer (2005: 128) returned to this subject, concluding that the inscription should be reconstructed: *h3tj-^c n Kpn(j) Nhsj-^cn[h m3^c hrw] [mrj] Sth nb Rb[n]w[n]*, ‘high official of Byblos Nehesi-ankh, justified, beloved of Seth, lord of Lebanon’.¹⁰

⁹ The stela of the ‘high official of Byblos’ Akai, found in the necropolis of the city (cf. Dunand 1939: No. 17079; Montet 1964: 63; Kitchen 1967: 52–53) presents the Egyptian *htp di nsw* formula and mentions an Egyptian goddess, Nut. The hieroglyphs were carved locally (Ryholt 1997: 89).

¹⁰ Wimmer translated *h3tj-^c* as ‘nomarch’ but I prefer to follow Allen’s (2008: 29) ‘high official’.

Ordinary Egyptian pottery was also imitated: A locally made hemispherical cup—a copy of the most common Egyptian drinking cup—was found in a tomb with two burials in Sidon, and was dated to the middle of the Thirteenth Dynasty (Forstner-Müller and Kopetzky 2009: 150). But more important to my argument is the Egyptian-style sceptre from Ebla, because it was found in the tomb of a ruler—Immeya—in the so-called Tomb of the Lord of the Goats. The origin and characteristics of this sceptre have been a matter of debate: while Scandone Matthiae (1997: 418) maintained that it was imported from Egypt and probably belonged to the Thirteenth Dynasty king Hotepibre, Ryholt (1997: 84, n. 265; 1998) argued that the mace was of local origin and the golden Egyptian hieroglyphs, which probably belonged to a former Egyptian import, were attached to it. If Ryholt's reasoning is correct, it confirms that elite emulation was carried out by other Levantine rulers (but cf. Scandone Matthiae 2003: 493, n. 18, for an answer to Ryholt). Egyptianized ivories, as well as other local objects with features related to the Egyptian kingship, have been found at Ebla. The set of Ebla ivories has been compared to two similar series, one found in a tomb at el-Jisr, near Jaffa, and the other in the tombs of Kerma (Scandone Matthiae 1997: 420–425). The latter set was dated to the Egyptian Second Intermediate Period, ca. 1650–1550 BCE.

However, as is long known, despite the existence of these and other Egyptianized objects in the Levant, at present the material from Byblos remains unique. No other Levantine site presents a similar amount of Egyptianized evidence strongly related to its rulers.

Despite the absence of Middle Kingdom political/military domination in the Levant and the existence of close interconnections based mainly on the exchange of prestige goods, the remains found at Byblos demonstrate that its rulers acknowledged the Egyptian king as a senior partner, and that the adoption of the Egyptian features should be understood as an elite emulation process. However, the reasons for the acquisition of those features coming from a high-status partner like Egypt deserves further analysis.

Patronage relationships in the northern Levant and the Euphrates area during the Middle Bronze: Towards an explanation of the Byblos elite emulation

Both Westbrook (2005) and Pfoh (2009) have discussed patronage relationships in the ancient Near East. Westbrook concentrated on the interpretation scholars gave to the socio-political relationships among the polities in western Asia (from Mesopotamia to Anatolia and to the Levant). Pfoh, through an analysis of the Amarna letters and the Hittite treaties, discussed the possibility of the existence of patronage bonds during the Late Bronze Age. I propose to introduce into the discussion the situation during the Middle Bronze Age in the northern Levant and the Euphrates area.

Patronage or patron-client relationships is a category of social linkage that can be broadly defined as a reciprocal, asymmetric bond between two partners that frequently use the terminology of kinship or household to refer to one another. Examples of patronage are easy to find not only in industrialized but also in peasant societies, so we can state that it

is widely spread through space and time. Eisendstadt and Roniger (1980: 49–50) defined numerous characteristics of such a bond, but clearly underlined the elements of solidarity, inequality and differences in power. It is a highly personal rather than a collective link, and operates as “a set of relationships which are ‘interstitial’ between the main institutions of any society” (Abercrombie and Hill 1976: 415). Patronage linkages are attested in a society—among different social strata—where legal-coercive institutions are weak. The interaction between the partners is characterized by the bartering of economic and political resources in exchange for promises of solidarity and loyalty that become fundamental to the relationship (*ibid.*: 422).

In ancient societies, patronage relationships could emerge when internally articulated through kinship bonds. They could also develop from the *inside*, through contact with an external power that the society attempts to emulate (Higginbotham 1996: 155). In this way, Levantine societies had to bear the intermittent presence of external powers, specifically the Egyptian state, which had been present in the Levant from the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE or even earlier. As Pfoh (2006: 173–174) states, the presence of such an external power would have been one of the triggers for the formation of patronage bonds in Levantine societies.

There could be at least two preconditions for the emergence of this kind of bond: on the one hand, a society articulated through kinship relations or where the legal-coercive system is clearly weak; on the other, the presence of a fluid contact with a high-status foreign power to be emulated locally. In this way the strong bond that connected Egypt with the Levantine city of Byblos was maintained through most of the 3rd millennium BCE and it could have imprinted the behaviour of both partners during the early 2nd millennium.

Later evidence also points to the existence of patronage relationships in the Levant. I am referring to the corpus of letters from el-Amarna. In 1967 Liverani proposed that the claims of the Levantine rulers to the Egyptian king were the result of a different conception of the social links. Some discussions of this topic—Lemche 1995 among others—follow Liverani’s initial hypothesis but explore the possibility of interpreting the discourse of the Levantine rulers as a result of patronage relationships.

Thus, the use of Egyptian titles, language, writing and religious discourse by the Middle Bronze rulers of Byblos could be explained as an elite emulation practice to obtain a *locally* high position in relation to other local rulers.

Two contemporaneous texts—the Alalakh level VII tablets¹¹ and the royal archive of Mari—as well as a passage in the Tale of Sinuhe, can shed light on this matter. They reveal the existence of a specific logic of interrelationships during the 19th–18th centuries BCE in the northern Levant and the Euphrates area. The region showed many rearrangements after the Eblaite regression during the early 2nd millennium BCE. Traditionally, Yamkhad, a new regional political system with a hub in Aleppo, as well as the political systems around Mari, Eshnunna and Babylon are commonly named ‘kingdoms’. Nevertheless, these systems of regional scope were far from the traditional concept of kingdom because they

¹¹ For discussions on the chronology of Alalakh level VII, cf. Na’aman 1976, 1979; Collon 1977. See also Zeeb 2004.

rested upon networks of personal relationships that recognized a leader among the rulers of the urban centres rather than on a political and administrative territorial-based structure. Perhaps only the unification of Mesopotamia under Hammurabi of Babylon—during the final years of his reign—could be classified as a traditional kingdom, despite the fact that it lasted for only a short time (Liverani 1995: 323). The leaders of these networks, surrounded and supported by their allies, obviously sought to acquire access to natural resources or gain control over exchange routes but also to enhance their prestige with eventual competitors. Marfoe pointed out (1979: 16) that there was a common denominator to the sporadic formation and dissolution of these regional polities: they possessed neither clearly delimited borders nor had disputes for establishing limits, since “they were not defined by the land as by the people”. The political power of a ruler would reside in the number of individuals who recognized him as superior in a personal, reciprocal and asymmetrical linkage based on loyalty bonds. It is probable that these particularities had favoured the establishment of alliances defined by circumstantial needs: the discourse of the local rulers in the Alalakh and Mari documents reveals the fluctuation in the political links, conflicts over hegemony, disputes around the status of allies and the use of the language of kinship linked to the practice of patronage. A passage in the Tale of Sinuhe also sheds light on this feature (see below).

A text from Alalakh level VII (AT/39/83) refers to the accession of Yarimlim to the throne of Alalakh after Abbael—the king of Aleppo—put down a rebellion of his allies and rewarded Yarimlim for his loyalty:

When his brothers rebelled against Abbael, their lord, king Abbael, with the help of the gods Hadad, Hebat and the spear [of Ishtar] went to Irride, conquered Irride and captured his enemy. (5) At that time Abbael, in exchange for Irride which his father granted, gave Alalakh of his free will. (8) And at that time, Yarimlim s[on of Hammu]rapi and servant of Abbael, brought up [his statue to the temple] of Ishtar. (11) [If(?) the off-spring(?) of Ab]bael shall take what he (Abbael) gave to Yarimlim—he will give him city for city. (13) Whoever shall change the settlement that Abbael has made and will do evil against Yarimlim and his descendants—may the god Hadad dash him into pieces with the weapon which is in his hand; may Hebat-Ishtar shatter his spear; may Ishtar deliver him into the hands of those who pursue him; may Ishtar...impress feminine parts into his male parts (Na’aman 1980: 210).

The language of kinship or household associated with patronage relationships appears in the text. In an earlier translation, Wiseman (1953: 25) rendered *ah-ḥu-šu* as “his allies” rather than “his brothers”. Na’aman’s rendering is supported by the fact that Abbael is called the “lord” of these “brothers”. Besides, Yarimlim is addressed in the text as the “servant” of Abbael. The text also denotes practices of power accumulation, given that Abbael not only put down the rebellion but imposed his ally, Yarimlim, in Alalakh, protecting him through a divine spell.

The letters of the Royal Archive of Mari also show this kind of social logic. The king of Mari, Zimri-lim, was linked by marriage to the elite of Aleppo. The letters reflect not only the language of kinship associated with patronage but the alliances, the conflicts and the asymmetrical relationships that existed among the rulers situated along the Euphrates. One of the letters (ARM 26–384) clearly shows these features. Ishme-Dagan, the ruler

of Ekallatum, sent his messengers to an audience with Hammurabi of Babylon. His messengers arrived together with the messengers of Zimri-lim of Mari. The text reveals the hierarchical order of the relationships of the rulers and the competition to curry the favour of the most prestigious one. Ishme-Dagan tells Hammurabi: “You made me write Zimri-lim as *son*. Is not [that man] *my servant*? He is not seated on a throne of his [own] majesty”. The upsetting answer of Hammurabi to the messengers of Ishme-Dagan is revealing: “The kings of the land of Šubartum have pointed their finger at your lord, and I wrote him as follows: I [said], ‘To those kings that write me as *sons* you [write] as *brother*. To Zimri-lim who writes me as *brother*, you write as *son*’. Is what I wrote to him wrong?” (Heimpel 2003: 333; emphasis mine).

Translated into the language of patronage, the above can be read as the solution of a ‘patron’ (a high status ruler) to the competitive fights among his lower-level allies (‘clients’) seeking upgrades in the pyramidal scale of relationships. The remainder of the text shows additional evidence in the same vein, since Ishme-Dagan recriminates Hammurabi for his preferential treatment of Zimri-lim.

The Tale of Sinuhe also demonstrates the existence of this kind of social bond. In the tale, Sinuhe, adopted by Aamunenshi, the ruler of Retjenu, is defied by a ‘champion’ of Retjenu:

... [T]he ruler [Aamunenshi] conferred with me and I said: “I do not know him; *I am not his ally*.... [I]t is envy, because he sees me doing your commissions.... [I]s an inferior beloved when he becomes a superior?” (Lichtheim 1973: 227; emphasis mine).

These lines exemplify the competition among lower-status rulers in Retjenu that can be understood as rivalry among ‘clients’ for the favour of a patron. In this sense, the appearance in an Egyptian text of the challenge of the champion of Retjenu towards Sinuhe is remarkable. The textual evidence coming from the northern Levant, the Euphrates area and Egypt converge on the existence of patronage in the relationships among those local elites during the Middle Bronze Age.

What can be said about the dynasty of Byblos? Even though there is some evidence for contact between a ruler of Byblos and Zimri-lim of Mari, there is no *explicit* confirmation that the rulers of Byblos shared the logic of patronage relationships. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the elite emulation they visibly accomplished can be related to the way the relationships among the local elites developed in the region. By linking themselves to the most prestigious elite of the time, the rulers of Byblos were substantially well positioned in the local system of inter-elite relationships. In this sense, the local title of ‘ruler of rulers’ that one of the rulers of Byblos owned could be evidence of the position this individual claimed locally, based upon his association with Egyptian royalty.

In sum, it is highly plausible that the rulers of Byblos had acquired some of the cultural traits of the most prestigious elite of that time—Egyptian royalty. The need for this elite emulation process was motivated by the existence of competitive relationships among the local rulers based on patronage bonds and sustained by the close links the rulers of Byblos had with the Egyptian elite.

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