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On Boats and Sea Peoples

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Representations of second millennium ships on a portable altar found in the excavations at Tel Akko are compared to other eastern Mediterranean vessels in an attempt to establish whether any known ship-building tradition is involved in their shapes. The period in which these Tel Akko boats appeared is the one in which the various groups of Sea Peoples' boats have been found in the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu. Since the Akko discovery, additional boat representations have been considered in the literature. Combined with other recent studies, which enlarge the available data on the Sea Peoples, we may be able to understand more about this enigmatic period.

When we consider what we know about the ships of the "Sea Peoples," we must admit that indeed it is not much. From the 14th century B.C. through the 12th, we have references to certain groups labeled Sea Peoples by Egyptologists who based the name on ancient Egyptian sources. We know that these people's most important means of transportation should have been the boat, yet hitherto have associated only one type of vessel with them.

In the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, representations of various Sea Peoples groups can be seen. This 12th century B.C. record distinguishes among the names of the particular groups: the Shardan (šrdn), Shekelesh (škeleš), Danuna (dnn), Teresh (tereš), Pleshet (plšt), Tjeker (tkr), and Weshesh (wšš). It shows their various modes of attire, the dress and headdress, as well as their distinct weapons. But although several boats are represented, there is no differentiation among the examples; thus we are presented with only one type of ship for all the various groups (Nelson *et al.* 1930).

The Egyptians in the Medinet Habu monumental sea and land battle scenes are represented in only one type of ship, although the text actually mentions three. We could argue that the vessel type attributed to the Sea Peoples is also likely not to have been the only one they used, either in the battle itself or in their area of activity, the

coast of the eastern Mediterranean. The Ramses Temple ships themselves have been dealt with, most recently by Wachsmann (1981: 187–220). With this in mind, we shall proceed to another ship, which may have served some part of the Sea Peoples.

Engraved representations of a new type of boat were found on an altar in the excavations at Tel Akko.¹ The altar is a rather unassuming limestone object measuring 30 × 24 × 26 cm. It was found on the tell itself in an area designated as Area H in Square L-7. The altar was found attached to a partially stone-lined pit. The pit contained a large amount of ash, polished stones, and polished pieces of ceramics; on the altar were ash and three pebbles about the size of an orange. During the excavation the date was set tentatively at ca. 1200 B.C. The date was determined by ceramic finds in the pit and the area associated with the altar.

The altar received a light manual cleaning after the close of the 1980 summer season, and it became clear that some marks noticed previously on the stone were actually compositions of ships, which until their discovery were unparalleled in the literature on ancient Mediterranean ships. The pebbles, too, bore unmistakable representations, among which were a small ship, a dolphin, possibly a bird, another fish—either a dolphin or a tuna—and many other signs incomprehensible to us at this juncture. The altar is formed in a peculiar

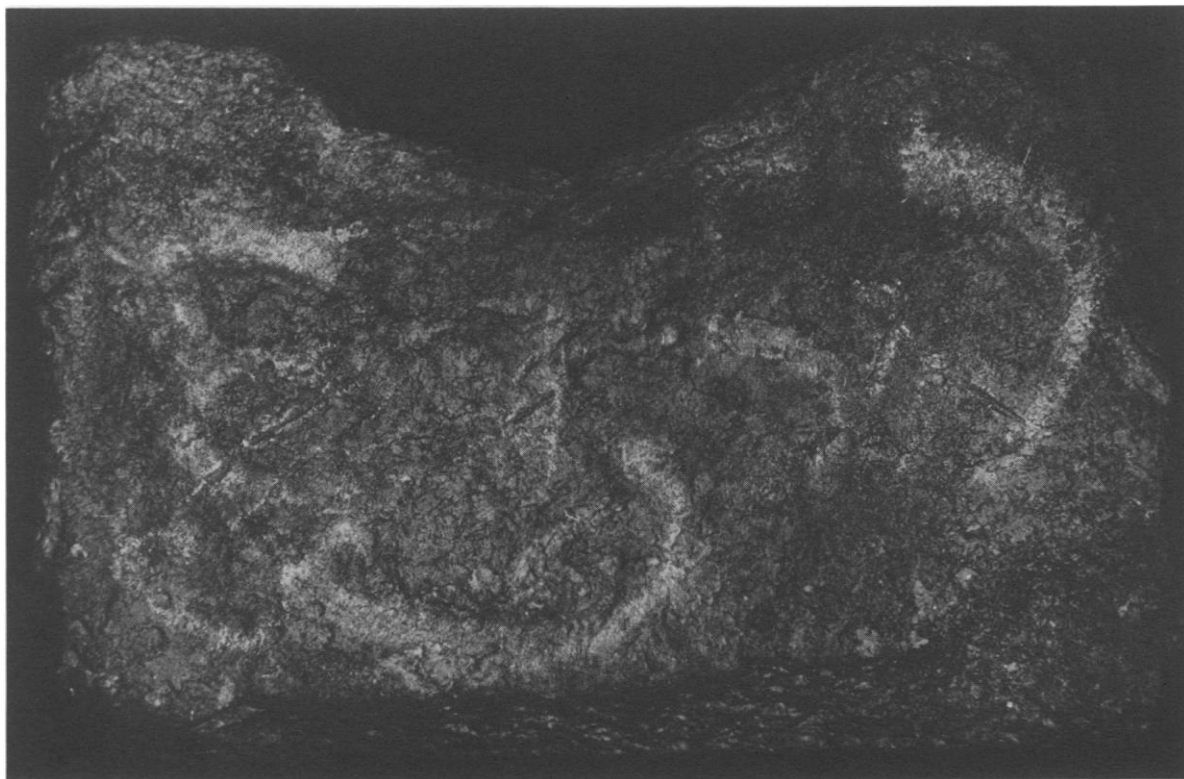


Figure 1. The Akko ship altar (ultraviolet photograph by M. Artzy).

manner, especially at its base; it may have been portable, perhaps a ship's altar, in secondary use on shore.² How the altar actually was used is not clear, although the finds around it and in the pit may provide some clues.³ The maritime nature of the decorations on the altar itself and on the pebbles lead us to surmise that the users of the altar were seafarers.⁴ These people were possibly outsiders who settled in Akko sometime in the second half of the 13th or at the beginning of the 12th century B.C.

The technical peculiarities of the ships on the altar have been discussed previously (Artzy 1984a: 59–64; 1984b: 33) and will not be repeated here. There are four boats on the altar. Three are positioned in such a way as to superimpose one another in an integrated composition. Using the rectangular front piece of the altar, the artist had a bit of unused space in front of the lowest and smallest of the three ships, so he added an even smaller vessel. Having started with the stem on the left side, he found the space too narrow to

finish the boat so he left it in three-fifths form (fig. 1). It is possible that the rest of the fourth boat is superimposed on the lowest of the three boats and is not distinguishable. More than one technique was used in engraving the boats on the Tel Akko altar; the artist used grooving and drilling along with plain incisions. The mast and brails, as well as the oars, tiller, and lower rudder on the biggest ship, were incised; grooving was used to accentuate the peculiar stem of the boats, while drilling was done for the curves of the hulls. There was no trace of paint on the altar so we cannot be certain that paint was used in the composition. We must add, however, that paint would have enhanced the separate boats in an impressive way.

Of the four boats the largest, which we will refer to as ship no. 1, is obviously the most detailed (fig. 2). It has a mast and shrouds (SH), oars, a sail (S) and two rudders or steering oars, and an attached tiller (T). The position of the steering oars and tiller is most important for our discussion as they are obviously placed at the

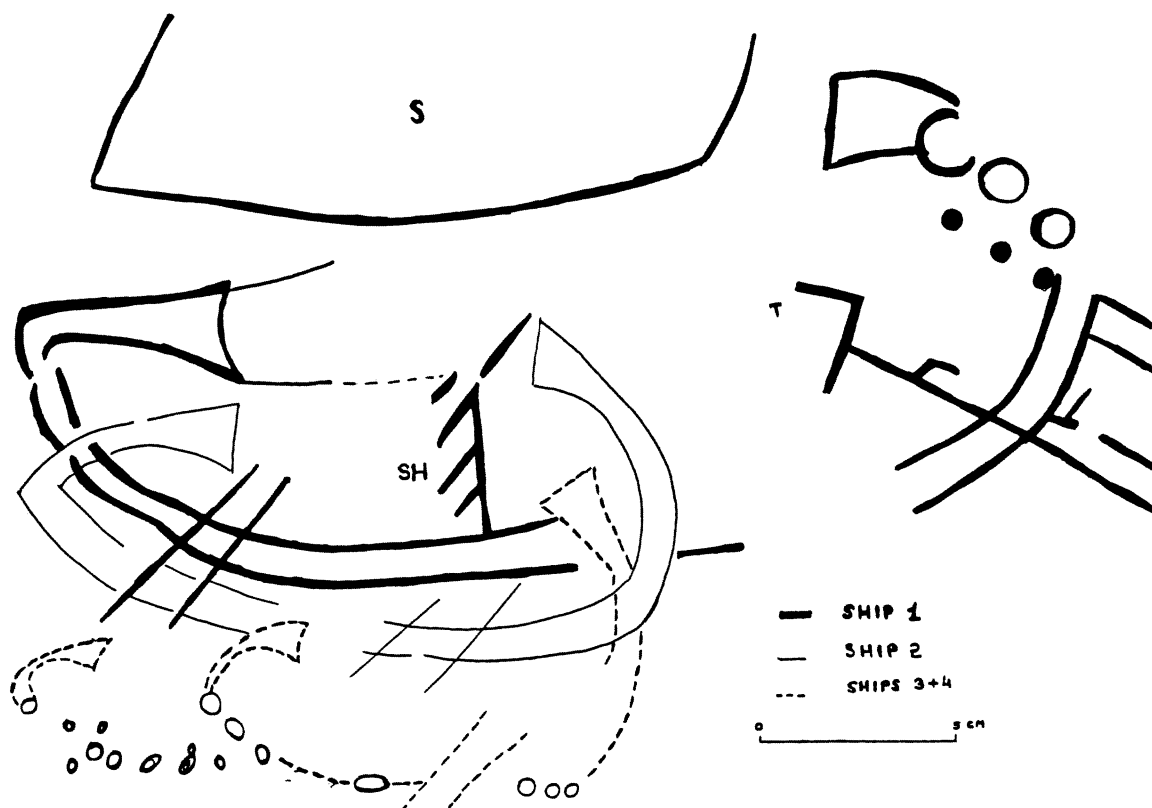


Figure 2. The Akko ships, sketched from the altar. Scale, 1:1 (drawn by R. Pollack).

back of the boat, thus aiding in the identification of the forward and aft of these boats as well as others of their type. The appearance of both oars and sails should not surprise us. Examples exist of ships bearing both oars and sails in earlier seas from the 13th century B.C. in Ugarit (Schaeffer 1962: 134, figs. 114, 115). It is more of a surprise not to find oars on any of the boats of the Sea Peoples at Medinet Habu.

The accentuated part of each of the four ships is the stem, the front part of the boat. While in the Medinet Habu reliefs the Sea Peoples' boats (fig. 3) are represented with an outwardly-curved duck head, in our boats there is an obvious inwardly-curved triangular shape, for which we coined the term "fan." Although the stern of the boats likewise has a triangular end, it is higher and not as inwardly curved. It is also narrower and definitely not as accentuated as the stem fan (Artzy 1984a). Prior to the Akko find such ships were unknown in the naval iconography of the ancient Mediterranean. Since this discovery, how-

ever, round boats with this particular fan have been reported at Kition on Cyprus, where they appear both on the outer wall of Temple I and the altar of Temple IV (Basch and Artzy 1985: 322–36). There is little question that here as well as at Akko the engravers took great care in the representation of the fans. The clearcut formation and the depth of the fans show that they were of paramount importance to the artists.⁵

The fan size as it appears on the ships of the Akko altar must have been exaggerated. For purely technical reasons the proportions as they appear in the composition are hard to accept. Had the fan been constructed of light material its chances for survival for any length of time would have been limited. Yet any heavier material would have made the ship top-heavy and the fan would have become a liability in the wind (see Artzy 1984a for more technical details). Thus the fan as portrayed on the altar was possibly exaggerated to accentuate its ritual importance. It served as a way of identifying the group that built the ships



Figure 3. Sea Peoples boat (from Nelson *et al.* 1930: pl. 39).

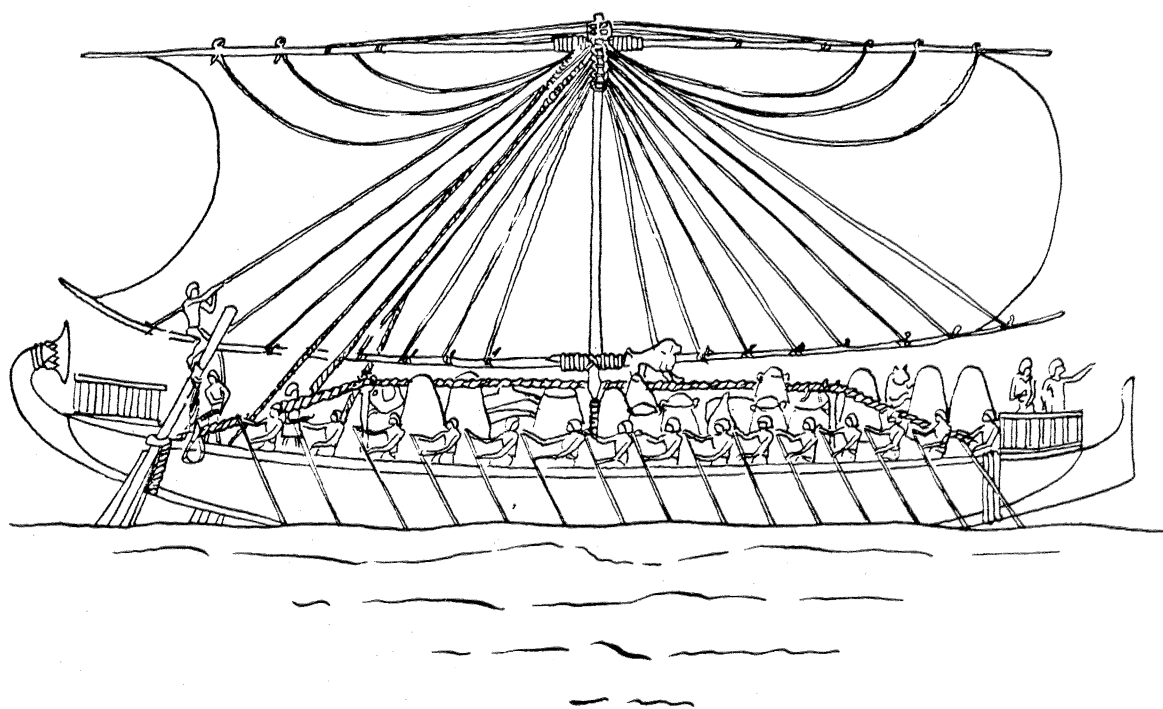


Figure 4. Seagoing ship of Hatshepsut (drawn by G. Barton).

and those who engraved them on this altar and on the altar and wall at Kition. The sacred, possibly magic, ornamentation of stern and stem are not unusual (Svornos 1914: 81–152), but for such an explanation we must leave the realm of logic. The 15th century B.C. seagoing ships of 18th Dynasty Egyptian queen Hatshepsut have a papyrus bud curving inward (fig. 4). However, the papyrus flower is placed on the stern of the ship, unlike

our fan which is obviously on the prow. There are also the *stoloi*, the horns (fig. 5) of the later Greek galleys which, much like our fans, are unequal in shape and size. The *aphlaston* of the classical Greek galley is yet another inward-curved extremity, although again in the aft of the ship (fig. 6).

The exaggerated inward incline of the fan can also be seen in a 13th century A.D. southern Italian ship of Emperor Friedrich II, where both

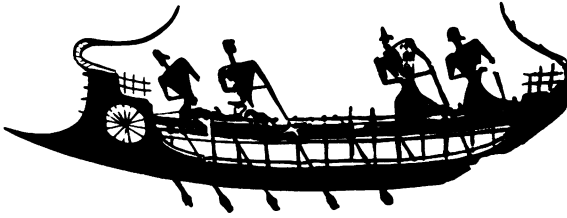


Figure 5. Stolo (from Casson 1971: fig. 72).

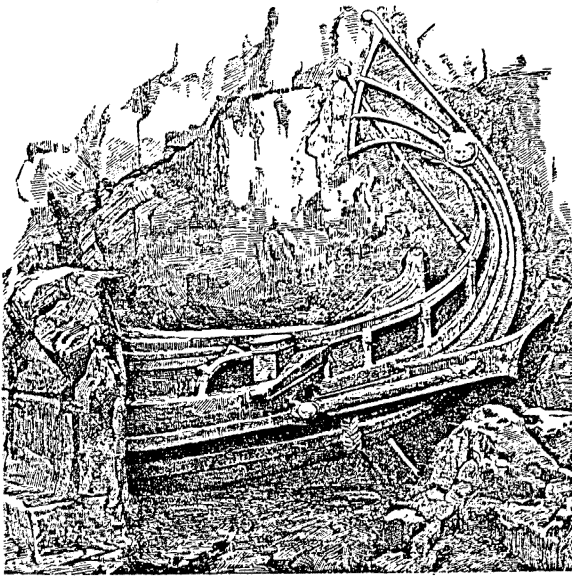


Figure 6. Aphlaston (from Casson 1971: fig. 108).

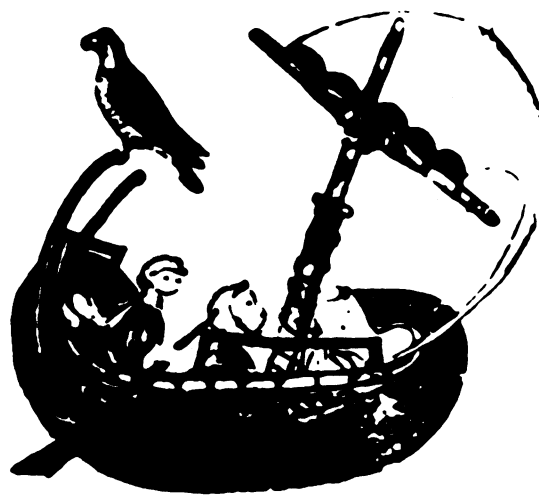


Figure 7. Emperor Friedrich II ship (from Moll 1929: pl. G:20).

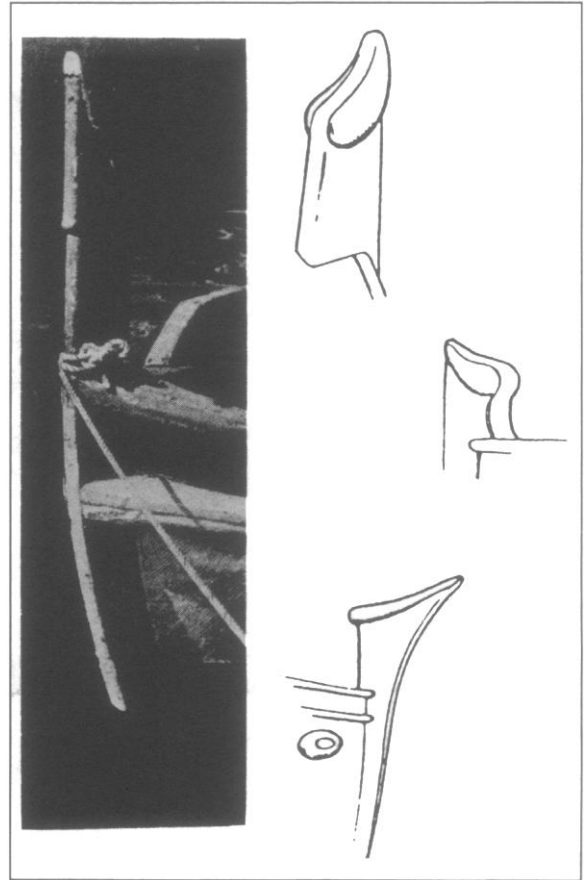


Figure 8. Capion (photograph by W. Gaspar).

the stern and the stem are inclined inward (fig. 7). Even in this century we find a comparable “decorational” element on some fishing boats around the southern coast of France, where the stempost ends with a sculptured swelling (fig. 8). The decoration is called the *capian* or *capion*, and it may represent a phallic symbol or, for that matter, a horn. Whatever its origin, it seems to be of a magic nature (Artzy 1984a: nn. 4, 5). We do not suggest that these much later examples are parallels, nor do we even hint that they might have some historic relationship to our boats. The examples are used to show that such representations may actually have magical or cultural elements peculiar to boat ornamentations.

As for the possible origin of the ships represented at Tel Akko and Kition, the most cogent question is whether they are indigenous to the Levant, Egypt, the Aegean, or elsewhere. The

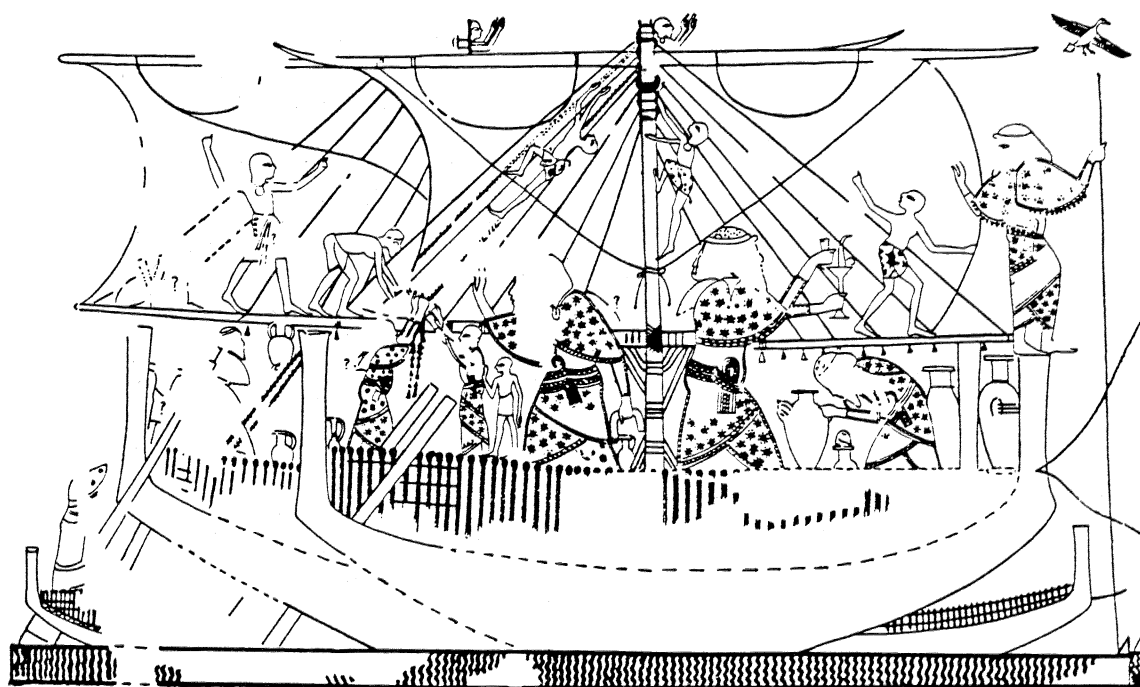


Figure 9. Syrian ship from the tomb of Kenamon, Thebes (from Davies and Faulkner 1947: 40–46, pl. 8).

material available for comparative work is limited by the sparseness of iconographic sources of the Levantine ships of this period. Looking in the direction of the Aegean is not of great help in this case. The famous “frying pans” from Syros of ca. 2400–2200 B.C. may have one extremity, but they are not of the same type as our fan boats; neither can we comfortably compare the two because of the large time gap between them. Later ships of the Middle and Late Helladic periods, some of which are presented by Vermeule (1964: 67) do not curve inward, even if they may have a slightly high extremity. Other types of ships from the Aegean can be seen in Wachsmann’s article (1981) in which he tries to show that the Medinet Habu Sea Peoples’ boats are related to the mainstream Aegean galley tradition and development. Those ships, however, cannot be compared favorably with the Akko and Kition ships. The Aegean geometric art warships with their *stoloi*—the horns—are later (Wachsmann 1981: 211, fig. 27).⁶

The fan ships are of the round ship type, which can be favorably compared to ships common on the Syrian coast in the second part of the second millennium B.C., as for example, the Syrian merchantmen as they appear in the tomb of Kenamon

in Thebes (fig. 9), or the *mnš* ship (fig. 10) on the temple of Ramses II at Abydos.⁷ The *mnš* ship, which was dealt with by Basch (1978: 99–123), has however only one vertical wide post, while the Akko and Kition types have both a wide stem and stern posts. The round ship hull type of the Akko and Kition ships could have been constructed by a Syrian shipwright, as could the high extremities and the widenings at the end of the stem and stern. We cannot claim, however, that the Syrian and our Akko ships are the same. The later Phoenician ships of the first millennium B.C. represented in the Assyrian reliefs in the palaces of Khorsabad and Küyünjik (fig. 11) have similar wide stern posts (de Graeve 1981: pls. 85, 87). All these ships, despite their high, widening extremities, still leave us with one element that cannot be compared—the inward incline of the stem of the Akko and Kition ships, which is unique in the known iconography of Syrian boats.

From Cyprus some later boat models of terra cotta can be noted. One such model found in Cyprus is exhibited at the Archaeological Museum in Nicosia (fig. 12); the other is now at the Maritime Museum in Haifa (fig. 13). The model in Cyprus is attributed to the seventh century B.C. It

has a fan-like stem and stern, the tops of which are inclined slightly inward; but the stem post is vertical, unlike our Akko and Kition ships. It is tempting to establish these fans and their continuations in Cyprus as analogous to those we are considering, but it is not quite so simple. The other ship model acquired in Cyprus has stem posts and a relatively high stern. Stieglitz, who published the model (Stieglitz 1972–75: 45), gives it a possible date of the middle of the 11th century B.C., although he does not rule out a later date. Wachsmann (1981: 209) designates it as Late Cypriot III and juxtaposes it with the Hama Urn boat, which Ingholt dated to the 12th–11th centuries B.C. (Riis 1948: 202). We cannot agree with Wachsmann's observation and therefore on his dating. Nonetheless the Maritime Museum model, despite its rather high extremities and the slight inward incline of the sternpost, has no fans.

It seems clear that it would be difficult to find the forerunners of the fan-type round ships. We have searched in the Aegean and Egyptian ancient worlds as well as in the Levant. As was shown, we can point to some similarities in the Levant of the second millennium, but cannot say without hesitation that they are related in any way. We see a possible continuation of the type in some of the first millennium Cypriot terra cotta vessels.

The Tel Akko altar ship representations and the Kition graffiti emphasize that the two are very closely related. Although the fan-type boats are in the majority on the wall of Temple I at Kition, there is at least one more discernible type of boat (Basch and Artzy 1985: 322–36). That boat is not of the round ship style with which we associate the fan. It is clearly a long ship of a type we might compare to a galley. The Medinet Habu Sea Peoples' boats have also been referred to as "galleys"; however, a comparison of the Kition and the Medinet Habu long ships shows that they have little in common. The Kition galley has no duck head, and may actually have a form of a triangular standard, a kind of fan. We will not discuss the two different styles of vessels on the Kition Temple I wall here, although their concurrent appearance does warrant a future study (Artzy 1985b; Artzy unpublished).

The appearance of a new type of boat at two sites in the eastern Mediterranean raises the possibility that we may be dealing with a new group, or rather another group, of these people. In both cases, the fan standard is an emblem but

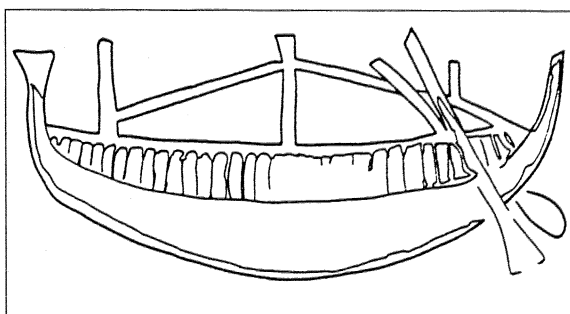


Figure 10. mnš ship from the temple of Ramses II at Abydos (drawn by R. Pollack).

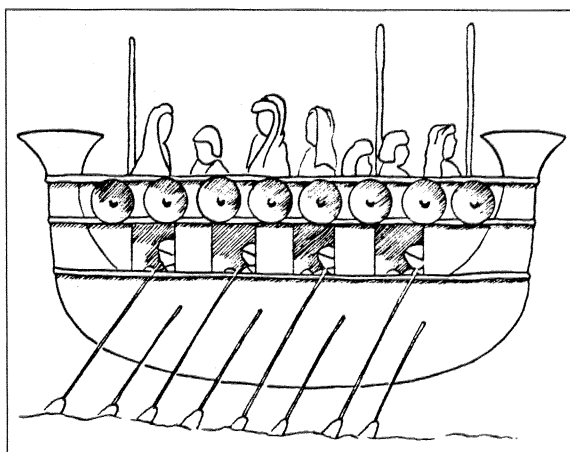


Figure 11. Phoenician ship from Küyünjik (drawn by G. Barton).

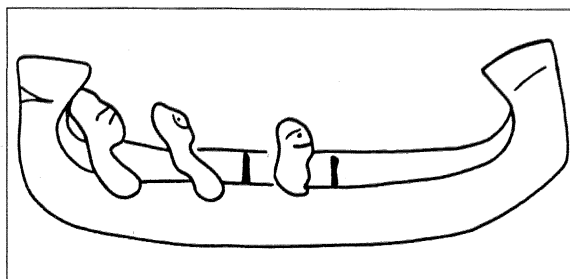


Figure 12. Terra cotta ship model from the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia.

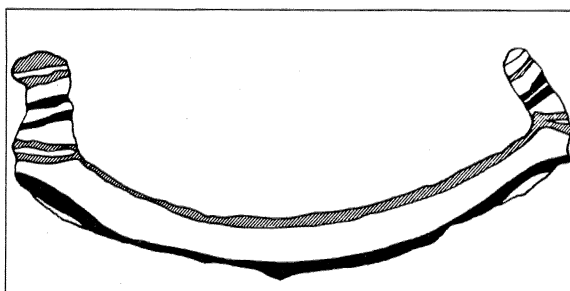


Figure 13. Terra cotta ship model from the Maritime Museum, Haifa.

one cannot currently point to one of the groups mentioned at Medinet Habu as the possible owners of these ships. Two groups, however, may be suggested. One is the Tjeker, who were settled by the 11th century B.C. in the coastal town of Dor. We have attestation of the Tjeker in the account of the Egyptian Wen Amon who docked his boat at the harbor of Dor. Although the existence of harbors at such an early date has been questioned, archaeological evidence indicates that, indeed, a harbor was functioning in Dor in the 11th century or even earlier (Raban and Artzy 1982: 145–47).

The possibility also exists that we are dealing with the ships of another group altogether. The Shardan, for instance, were mentioned already in the time of Ramses II, at the battle of Kadesh, in which they were used against a Hittite coalition. Although this is usually pointed to as the one place where Ramses II was involved with the Shardan as possible mercenaries, there may be another mention of this king's involvement with these people. According to the "Tanis Stela," published originally by Petrie (1888: pl. 2) there is a brief record of a possible battle between the Shardan and the Egyptians in the time of Ramses II. In 1949 the French Egyptologist, J. Yoyotte, published the same stela, with an addition that was not available in the original publication. The added part, which matches the left corner of the stela, adds to our knowledge concerning the Shardan. Yoyotte translates (1949: 43) "... Quant aux Shardanes au coeur rebelle ... sur des vaisseaux combattants au milieu de la mer ..." (As to the Shardans of the rebellious heart ... in the warboats on the sea.) The Shardan came with their warboats at a rather early period, i.e., the time of Ramses II. It seems from the text that they may have been involved already in earlier sea battles with the Egyptians than the one mentioned in this text.⁸

This evidence consequently supports an early intrusion by people who seem to have had some relation to the sea and preferred to settle, or be settled, in coastal areas. The evidence may be extended even further to include inland sites at which mercenaries may have been settled by

established states, such as the site of Har Adir (Raban 1980: 87). Although such a theory is far from proven, we cannot *a priori* discard it. Akko, with its ship altar, and Dor because of its strategic coastal position, might well be considered as having had mercenary settlements at this time. In addition there is the importance of ashlar masonry as an indicator of possible influences that affected both Cyprus and Israel at about the same time. Renewed excavations by Karageorghis (1982: 704–24) at the site of Maa Palaeokastro, a promontory in southwestern Cyprus, have brought to light an occupation with ashlar masonry in the 13th century B.C. Although the site was inhabited for a relatively short time, Karageorghis distinguishes at least two phases: Level II, in which Mycenaean IIIC 1b pottery appeared; and Level I, in which he found Mycenaean IIIB. The oldest level of Maa's Late Cypriot habitation is to be equated with LC IIc and not, as was previously thought, LC IIIa (Karageorghis 1982: 713). There is a possibility of an even earlier "intrusive" habitation, that of the builders of the unfinished fortification of Lara. Lara, situated on a large peninsula 10 km north of Maa, may actually predate the earliest settlement of Maa. It has been suggested that the builders of the unfinished fortifications moved south to the smaller peninsula of Maa, where it was easier to build a fortification wall and where water was more plentiful (Fortin 1978: 66–67).

The appearance of boat types at Tel Akko and Kition in the period in which we expect to find activities of Sea Peoples thus coincides with new types of settlements, the appearance of ashlar masonry in Cyprus and possibly Israel (Raban 1980: 257), and harbor construction. These occurrences will require further study before they can be attributed with greater certainty to any particular group of people. We should, however, not lose sight of the Shardan, who appear not only as mercenaries in Pharaoh's land troops of the 13th century B.C., but as mariners who at the same time roamed the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.⁹

NOTES

¹Excavations in the area of Tel Akko in which the altar was found were directed by the present writer with the help of students from the Carsten Niebuhr Institute, University of Copenhagen. Several students from the University of Haifa aided in the excavations. Our thanks to G. Barton and P. Peled for their discussions and to L. Basch, without whom the boats might have remained unpublished. M. Dothan has kindly allowed us to publish this report before the final publication of the excavations is complete.

²Discussion of the shape of the altar will appear in a book, *Maritime Akko*, to be edited by E. Linder.

³This will be discussed in the final report of the Tel Akko excavations.

⁴One of the stones was identified by M. Inbar as quartz foreign to the area.

⁵None of the Kition boats has a rudder or a tiller, hence the identification of the stem and stern was done on the basis of the Akko ship.

⁶We cannot quite see that the inward inclined horns of Wachsmann's fig. 26:c or the *stoloi* of his fig. 27 are necessarily bird heads. Bulls, or their horns alone, are not unusual motifs, especially in the Aegean iconography.

⁷I thank L. Basch for pointing out this and many other details.

⁸I thank P. J. Frandsen, of the Carsten Niebuhr Institute, University of Copenhagen, for helping with the translation, and for pointing out some important details concerning the Egyptian language.

⁹Since the article has been written, a new boat engraved representation has been found in P. Åström's excavations at Hala Sultan Tekke in Cyprus. G. Hult has published a monograph on Bronze Age Ashlar Masonry in the Eastern Mediterranean, which was too late for use in this study.

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