

FROM ACEMHÖYÜK TO MEGIDDO THE BANQUET SCENE IN THE ART OF THE LEVANT IN THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BCE

Irit Ziffer

Abstract

This article examines the role of Syria-Palestine in the evolution of the long-enduring banquet theme that was first conceived in Greater Mesopotamia ca. 3000 BCE to carry a royal message. It traces the visual transformations of the banquet theme in the Levant during the second millennium BCE, while exploring how these changes in form repertoire reflect a local western Asiatic agenda.

The longevity of an artistic theme lies in its ability to formulate a powerful significant image that is easily grasped by people. Such an artistic theme, once chosen, tends to be perpetuated and emulated. The banquet is such a theme. This formalized drinking that gladdens the heart, as texts tell us,¹ was originally an element in the disbursal of food rations and the sharing of wealth by the power that controlled subsistence to the population. Over time, however, this function was lost and the banquet became a social regulator, a means of display conveying the ideology of the ruling class (Michalowski 1994: 30–31). The banquet imagery was constantly charged with new meaning and it was therefore kept alive (Even Zohar 1990: 202). Humans and gods feasted alike. Divinities were cared for and fed, and even the dead partook of sumptuous meals. The ruler's appearance in the context of the banquet indicates that it was the perfect occasion for projecting his exalted image. Moreover, the representation of the ruler feasting alone came to be the emblematic image of the fortune of his people (Murray 1995: 8). It was used to reaffirm rank, for decision making and as an opportunity to discuss matters of great importance. The drinking ceremony thus became a high point of court life and an efficient tool in power politics. This potent royal image that became rooted in Greater Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE persisted and developed in both word and picture over the millennia and over wide regions, both in the East and West.

ORIGINS AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE OF THE BANQUET SCENE

The banquet is one of the major themes in Mesopotamian art from the Early Dynastic period (early third millennium) on (Selz 1983; Collon 1992). The seated participants, who are sometimes differentiated by dress and hairstyle, are both male and female.

¹ Compare Judges 9: 13.

They are shown facing each other, sometimes with a table laden with food between them, either with raised cups in their hands (Fig. 1) (see also Amiet 1980: Pl. 63: 840, 841, 843, Pls. 88–90 *passim*), or sipping drinks through a straw from a shared vessel (Fig. 2) (see also Amiet 1980: Pl. 63: 842, Pls. 88–90 *passim*). Musicians and singers may be shown (Fig. 3), as well as fanning attendants holding towels (Fig. 4) and bearers of provisions (Fig. 5) (see also Amiet 1980: Pls. 90: 1182, 1190–1192; 93: 1222, 1223; Pittman 1998: 77–79). Sometimes only one banqueter is shown (Fig. 6) (see also Collon 1987: nos. 660, 661).

The drinking party was celebrated on multiple occasions—upon triumphant return from battle (Fig. 7) (see also Amiet 1980: Pl. 92: 1213) and in conjunction with the hunt, showing the royal hero vanquishing beasts (Fig. 8) (see also Amiet 1980: Pl. 89: 1176, 1178), both events representing the king's task of maintaining order in the world and protecting it against enemies and the forces of nature that were constantly a threat; or as part of rituals (Fig. 9) (see also Amiet 1980: Pls. 89: 1180; 92: 1218–1220) and temple building (Fig. 10) (see also Boese 1971: Pl. 30). All these themes are timeless acts, patterns of events, not their actualities (Gronewegen-Frankfort 1951: 21, 159), icons of the ideal ruler, established in order to serve the needs of the ruling class. The return from battle is best known from the Standard of Ur, where the theme is elaborated on two side panels of the soundbox of a lyre: One side panel depicts the battle fought by racing chariots and a phalanx of soldiers, the bloodstained aftermath and the culmination, with naked and bound prisoners humbled before the king. The other panel, which shows the king banqueting to the sound of the lyre and a singer, depicts the wealth of the land and the bearers of provisions. Each side panel is conceived as an independent unit, representing the contradictory yet interrelated themes of the turbulence of war and the serenity of peace, respectively; together they form a visual expression of the position of the king as the core of life (Hansen 1998: 47). Abbreviated versions of the theme are well known from contemporaneous cylinder seals (Amiet 1980: Pl. 92: 1216) as well as from the votive stone plaques (Amiet 1980: Pl. 93: 1223) and painted pottery of the period (Delougaz 1952: Pl. 138). This reductive imagery, a mere emblem of the story, still evoked for the instructed viewer the entire chain of connotations and values of the theme of the ruler as the maintainer of order (Schapiro 1973: 9–11).

Scenes of banqueters with raised cups may also show celebrators holding a branch, which serves as a further differentiating attribute or accessory object (Fig. 11) (see also Amiet 1980: Pls. 88: 1155, 1157; 89: 1168; 93). Whatever the setting, it is the cup-raising figure that epitomizes the iconography of the act of drinking. Clearly, both the cup and the branch carry special symbolic significance. Thus, the Sumerian word for king, LUGAL, Akkadian *šarru*, is written with the word-sign combining LU₂ and GAL, which can be translated 'man' + 'great', meaning that the king was

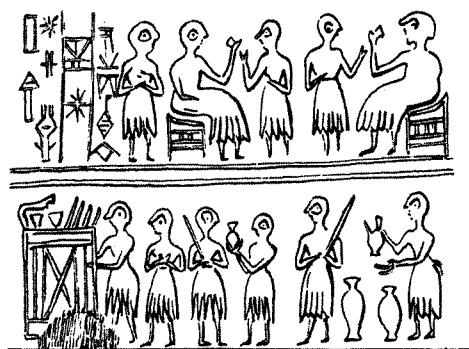


Fig. 1. Banqueters raising cups, cylinder seal, Ur (Amiet 1980: Pl. 90: 1184).

Fig. 2. Drinking with straws from a communal jar, cylinder seal, Ur (Amiet 1980: Pl. 90: 1187).



Fig. 3. Musical entertainment at the banquet, cylinder seal, Ur (Amiet 1980: Pl. 90: 1194).

Fig. 4. Fanning attendant with towel, cylinder seal inscribed Puabi, the queen, Ur (Amiet 1980: Pl. 90: 1182).



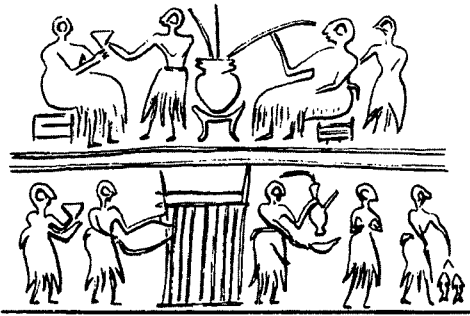


Fig. 5. Provisions brought to the banquet, cylinder seal, Ur (Amiet 1980: Pl. 90: 1190).



Fig. 6. Single banqueter, impression, Ur (Collon 1987: no. 661).



Fig. 7. Victory banquet, cylinder seal (Amiet 1980: Pl. 92: 1213).



Fig. 8. Hunting banquet, cylinder seal (Amiet 1980: Pl. 89: 1178).



Fig. 9. Ritual banquet, cylinder seal (Amiet 1980: Pl. 89: 1180).



Fig. 10. Temple foundation banquet, limestone plaque of Ur-Nanshe, first king of Lagash, Telloh (Boese 1971: Pl. 29: 1).



Fig. 11. Banqueter holding cup and plant, seal impression, Fara (Amiet 1980: Pl. 88: 1157).

first or greatest among his peers. However, as Hallo has demonstrated, the pictogram for GAL has the appearance of a cup, Akkadian *kāsu*, which is one of the meanings of the logogram. Therefore, the original sense of LUGAL=*šarru*, ‘king’, may well have been ‘the man of the cup’.² The West Semitic equivalent for *šarru* is formed from the root *MLK*, ‘to rule, to become king’, as in the Hebrew *melek* and Akkadian *malku*, as in the list of synonyms *šarru*=*malku* (Hallo 1996: 191–193). Therefore, the seated figure with the cup in one hand must be the king. The leafy branch held in his other hand, which stands out as part of the royal insignia, denotes the sceptre.³ In ancient Semitic languages the vegetal element appears together with the seat in word-pairs that are used as parallelisms in poetic language. The branch, Ugaritic *ḥt*, Phoenician *ḥtr*, Akkadian *ḥaṭṭu*, appears in combination with *ks*,⁴ Akkadian *kussû*⁴ or Aramaic *mšb*,⁵ ‘seat’ to signify kingship. Hebrew has *šbṭ* denoting ‘staff, sceptre’⁶ in combination with *ks* (Psalm 45: 7) (Van Buren 1956; Donner and Röllig 1964: 4; Tawil 1974: 46–47; Avishur 1984: 590–591; Ziffer 1999: 158–162, 287–288), whereas Hebrew *ḥtr* denotes the shoot that comes forth from the tree, the Messiah as the king of justice (Isaiah 11: 1–5). The gods bestowed the royal sceptre on the king, thereby conferring divinely-ordained legitimacy upon him. It thus becomes clear that the image of a seated man raising a cup and holding a branch signified the king, and that the throne, cup and vegetal element are the *pars pro toto* that stands for the metonymy of kingship. The image of the enthroned person raising cup and holding sceptre became the metaphor for exercising kingship.⁷ Particularly revealing visual evidence are the Akkadian sealings depicting the royal family of Urkesh/Tell Mozan, where the cup signifies the dynastic programme. When the royal couple is shown seated facing one another (Fig. 12) it is the king who holds the cup while

² The image of king/man holding a cup was familiar to the author of Genesis, as is evident in Genesis 40: 11–13, which describes the cup bearer placing the cup in pharaoh’s hand. The image was also familiar to the author of Psalm 75: 9, who described the cup in the Lord’s hand. See Rin and Rin 1996: 27, 106, as well as the Song of Kumarbi, where Alalu, a primeval king, is described enthroned and holding cups (Hoffner 1990: 40). I am indebted to an anonymous reader for this reference.

³ In Early Dynastic art the branch held by the man with the cup may be identified with an offshoot of the date palm: the male inflorescence or the female spadix, which is held by goddesses. See Hansen 1998: 59.

⁴ Ugaritic: *CAT* 1.2 I: 17–18; *KTU* 1.6 VI: 27–29; Parker 1997: 96, 163. Phoenician: *KAI* 1: 2; Akkadian: *CAD* K: 152; *CAD* H, 154.

⁵ Aramaic: *KAI* 214: 8–9, 15, 20, 25.

⁶ Both Ugaritic and Hebrew have *mṭ*-*mṭh*, staff, as a synonym for *ḥt* and *šbṭ* (*KTU* 1.23: rev. 40; Parker 1997: 211; Ezekiel 19: 11–14).

⁷ See also the word pair *mlk-yṭb/yšb* in Ugaritic and in the Bible, Avishur 1984: 384; Metzger 1985b: 250–255.

the crown prince touches his lap⁸ in a gesture communicating an important political message: This particular son of Queen Uqnitum is to succeed Tupkish, his father, the *endan* of Urkesh, on the throne. The other child sits on the queen's lap. However, when the queen is shown without the king (Fig. 13) it is she who holds the cup towards the royal daughter who touches her lap (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: Fig. 6; Kelly-Buccellati 2003: 226). When the king appears with the crown prince enthroned on a recumbent lion in the throne room (Fig. 14) he holds a mace-sceptre, while the young prince touches his lap in a gesture of homage, submission and affiliation but also stating the prince's incumbent right to the throne (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996: 72–75, Figs. 6, 7). The image of the cup as a symbol of sovereignty is quite apparent in Ur III cylinder seals where the owner of the seal is presented before a seated figure, be he a god or king, raising a cup. These seals featuring the "Presentation Scene" belonged to elite members of the Ur III state organization and indicated the seal owner's obedience to the ruler, divine or earthly (Winter 1986). A Mari letter reflects the importance of the cup in the figurative language of vassal relationship. An obedient vassal who won the king's favour was invited to raise a cup with Zimrilim. However, this subordinate defecated into the cup from which he once drank, thereby metaphorically committing an act of hostility towards his sovereign (Michalowski 1994: 35–36).

THE BANQUET SCENE IN THE LEVANT

This presentation aims to examine the role of Syria-Palestine in the evolution of the banquet theme: how the subject was conceived of in Levantine imagination and the transformations it underwent.⁹

In the Old Syrian period the feasting couple seated on both sides of a laden table appears as a secondary motif on cylinder seals. The Ebla basins, discussed in detail below, feature the banquet theme in conjunction with soldiers (basin from Temple B, the oldest, dating from around 1850 BCE) or with soldiers and animals (basin from Temple D, dating from around 1800), representing the return from the battle theme and the hunting theme.

The ivory box from Level III of the Kārum I period (18th century) of the burnt

⁸ Compare to Genesis 24: 2; 47: 29, where touching the thigh is a metaphor for allegiance, and Genesis 46: 26 where the thigh is mentioned in the sense of issue of loins, offspring. As Hallo (2005: 149) has noted, lifting a child on one's knee or lap is in itself a sign of legitimation, as attested in a Mari letter, "Am I not Adad the lord of Kallassu who reared (raised?) him between my thighs (*paḥalliya*, 'my testicles') and restored him to the throne of his father's house?" (W.L. Moran, ANET, 3rd ed., 1969, 625).

⁹ I refer to Syria not as a geographical term but as an area where Syrian culture developed. Northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia were home to an indigenous civilization, which was comprised of several interacting cultural traditions of the ancient Near East (Bunnens 2000: 12).

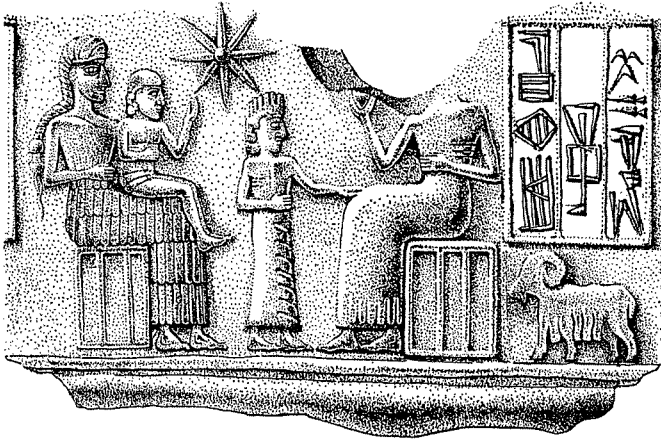


Fig. 12. Rulers of Urkesh and their children, seal impression, Tell Mozan (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: Fig. 4b).



Fig. 13. Queen of Urkesh and her child, seal impression, Tell Mozan (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–96: Fig. 7: q6).

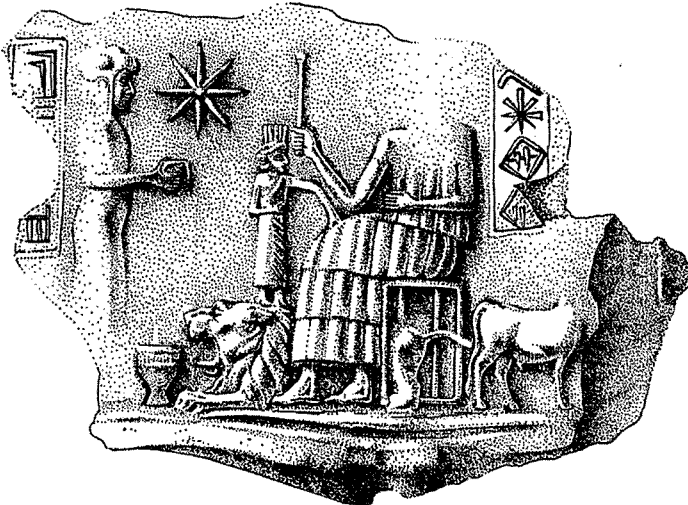


Fig. 14. Ruler of Urkesh with crown prince, seal impression, Tell Mozan (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: Fig. 4: a).

palace at Acemhöyük (Özgüç 1976; Mellink 1993: 425; Özgüç 2002: 247) was carved from a single elephant tusk (Fig. 15). The lower part is nearly cubic in shape with a concave transition to a round neck with a flaring rim. It is 10.3 cm high and 7.2 cm wide. The cubic section is 6.5 cm high. Rivet holes at the four corners of the base of the box indicate that it was attached to another object, perhaps a stand. Bronze studs set off in gold frame the sides of the box and iron and lapis lazuli studs arranged in a row divide each rectangular field into two panels bearing figurative reliefs in two or three rows carved in miniature. Dense files of humans and animals are depicted against a striated background. The weathered upper panel of Face A shows a double frieze of animals. In the lower panel a banquet scene is borne by a double animal frieze. On the right hand side a figure wearing a tall headdress is seated on a throne with the back curved at top and legs that terminate in lion paws. The enthroned figure holds a tapering cup in his right hand, while the left hand rests on his knee. Behind the throne is a diminutive seated figure. Seven attendants approach the seated figure. Their bare chests are shown frontally, allowing each of their arms to be depicted in full detail. The leading attendant offers a fish. Next, attendants 2 and 4 shoulder a pole from which vessels are suspended, while attendants 3 and 5 carry poles with fish. Attendant 6 leads a goat and attendant 7 holds a monkey by the neck. Behind attendant 7's shoulder is a head facing the edge of the box. The spaces between the heads of the attendants are filled with reclining hares. The banquet scene is borne by a double frieze of tightly grouped animals. Beneath the throne a monkey (baboon) sits above a recumbent wingless female sphinx with one long hair curl. Beside the sphinx are two monkeys (baboons again), one raising its hands in an Atlantid pose that supports the first two attendants. Two lions with curled-in tails originally of Egyptian style and un-Syrian (Metzger 1985a: 267),¹⁰ on either side of an antelope, leap into the upper register over alternating reclining antelopes (goats?) and a lion in the middle. A goat and three sheep close the frieze. Configurations of lions hunting herbivores are depicted on faces B–D.

The Acemhöyük box displays various Near Eastern and Egyptian artistic practices that went into the formation of Syrian art. The tall headdress on the main figure is reminiscent of the crown worn by the royal hero represented on the dagger handle from the Obelisk Temple at Byblos, an adaptation of the White Crown of Upper Egypt (Hansen 1969: 283) and the crown of the two kilted heroes smiting a naked figure on the lowest register of the back face of the Ishtar stele from Sanctuary G3 at Ebla (Matthiae *et al.* 1995: 390–395).¹¹ The lion-pawed throne of the box has a close parallel at Kültepe Ib on a sealing stylistically related to the Aleppo workshop (Özgüç 1968a: Pl. XI: C; Collon 1981: 35; compare Frankfort 1939: Pl. XLII: m), which is later

¹⁰ Syrian tails curl out in an S-shape.

¹¹ For the Bottle gourd as the prototype for the Egyptian White Crown see Niwiński 2000.

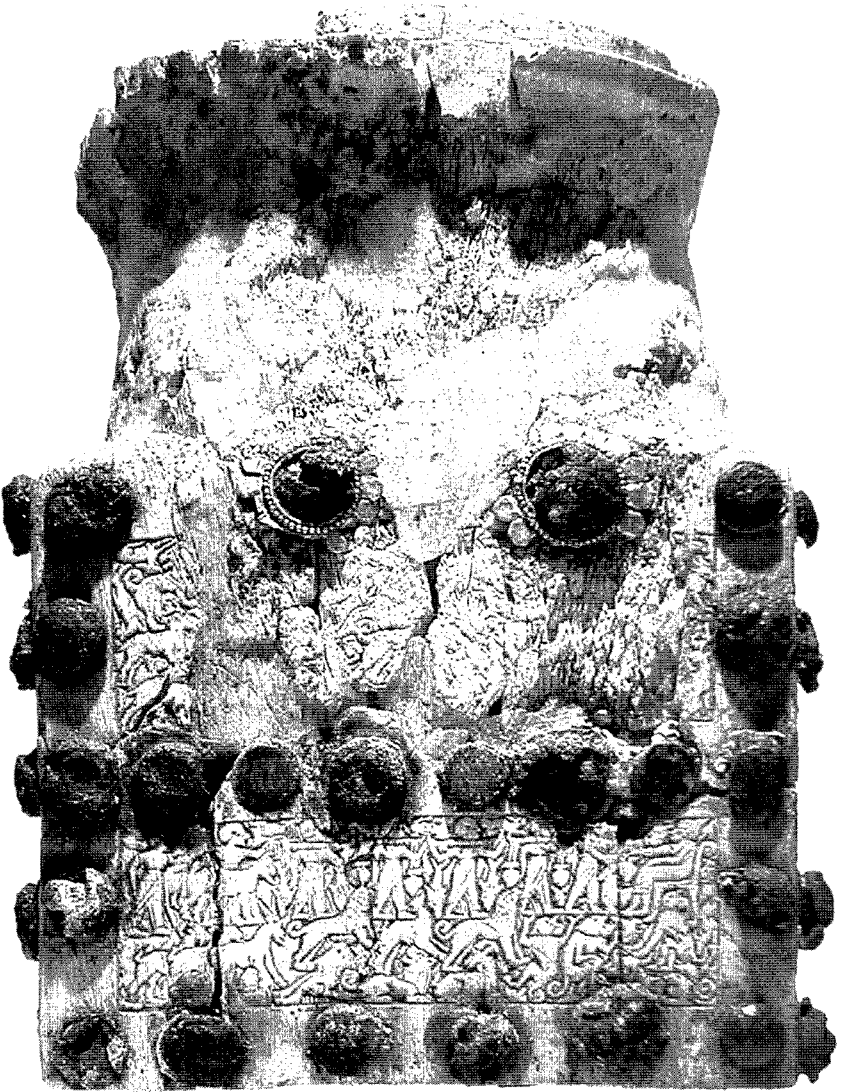


Fig. 15. Ivory box, Achemhöyük. Ankara, Museum of Anatolian Civilizations.



Fig. 15a. Detail. Banquet scene borne by a double animal frieze.

encountered on an incomplete¹² ivory pyxis from Tomb III at Minet el-Beida. Here a seated figure is approached by another figure as a lion and bull meet in combat in the background (Gachet 1992: 69; Feldman 2002: 13–14).¹³ The head of the couchant female sphinx recalls the Pratt ivories from Acemhöyük, which feature the prominent noses and strong chins that are unique to Anatolian portraiture.¹⁴ Both the Pratt Ivories and the Acemhöyük Box Sphinx are based on an Egyptian prototype of the male sphinx, always either wingless or with folded wings, that is associated with the pharaoh himself (Teissier 1996: 80). Like the spiral locks on the ivories, the long curl behind the ears derives from Egyptian Middle Kingdom hair fashion. However, the sphinx on the box has only one hair curl, which is typical of Syrian seals (Teissier 1996: 80), whereas the Acemhöyük ivory figurines display two or more locks behind the ear that fall on the breast and the back of the sphinxes (Harper 1969: 160–161). In contrast to the fine miniature seal-like carving of the Acemhöyük box, the Pratt ivories, early manifestations of Hittite style based on familiarity with both the Egyptian prototype and the Syrian model,¹⁵ seem like clumsy works of art, in spite of their boldly three-dimensional treatment. The file of reclining hares that fills the spaces between the attendants is reminiscent of animal patterns of the early Syrian style glyptic (Collon 1987: nos. 200–201).¹⁶

The banquet scene supported by an animal frieze dominated by a lion threatening herbivores is reminiscent of the banquet scene on the limestone basin from the cella of Temple D (Fig. 16), the Ishtar Temple, at Ebla (TM.65.D.236). Here the heads and lower bodies of two attendants carrying situlae are portrayed in profile, while their upper bodies are shown in full view. This is the same manner the ivory carver of the Acemhöyük box used, in order to show that the pair of attendants carried their load together. However, the animal frieze on the Acemhöyük box is far livelier, with the animals leaping into the banquet register. Soldiers brandishing lances led by a standard-bearing dignitary echo the theme of return from battle on the Ebla basin. The royal couple is seated with cups raised on both sides of a typical Eblaite bull-hoofed table.¹⁷ The king is distinguished by his cap, which has a pronounced frontal peak, the dynastic crown of Middle Bronze age Ebla (Porada 1980: 86; 1982: 166, n. 27; Matthiae 1995: 421–422). This banquet scene is borne by a file of animals

¹² The fact that the box was placed in the tomb unfinished suggests local production.

¹³ Compare Metzger 1985a: Pls. 109–110 for variations of lion-pawed thrones in the Late Bronze Age.

¹⁴ Compare hippopotamus ivory idol from Kültepe, Özgüç 2002: 245–246. For provenancing the Pratt ivories to Acemhöyük, see Özgüç 1968b: 320.

¹⁵ Mellink 1969: 285; 1987: 67.

¹⁶ An identically rendered hare floats between the heads of the heroes smiting the nude figure on the Ishtar stele from Ebla.

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of the Eblaite table see Pinnock 2000: 1401.

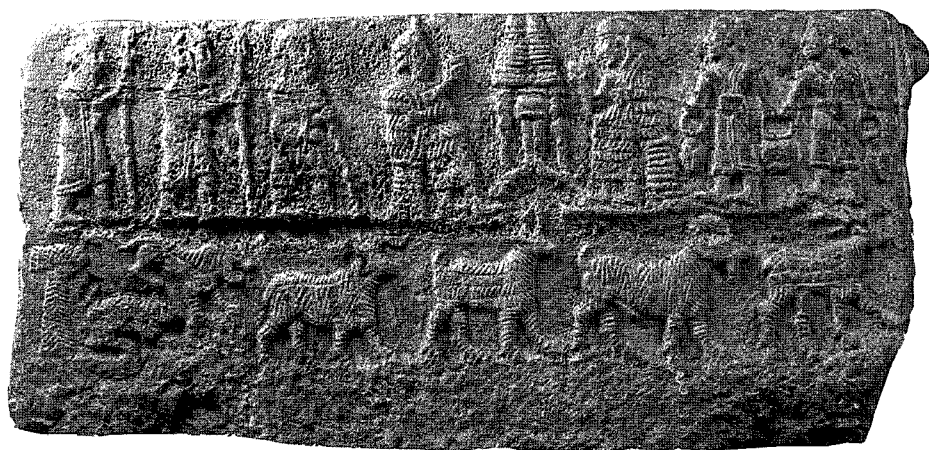


Fig. 16: Limestone basin, Ebla (Matthiae 1995: 421).

whose heads protrude into the upper register. The animals carrying the banquet scene were no doubt intended to represent the power of the king—no one but the king can control these powerful creatures, and he is thus represented as the maintainer of order against the forces of chaos. Once tamed by the king these ferocious beasts must have been conceived as protective of the king.

The basalt basin from Temple B, the ‘Dead King’s Sanctuary’ (Fig. 17), is mounted on twelve lion protomes. A file of weapons-carrying soldiers approaches the feasting king, who wears the typical cap with the frontal peak. This headdress is also worn by the king on a limited series of the ‘Syro-Cappadocian’ or ‘Syrian colony’-style group imprinted on documents from Karum Kanish II (Porada 1980: 386; Teissier 1993; 1994: 57), a haematite seal from Tell Hammam et-Turkman (Marchetti 2003: 165, Fig. 6), as well as on a gold-leaf plaque from Byblos (Metzger 1985a: Pl. 104: 1090A).¹⁸ When enthroned, this figure holds a cup (Fig. 18; Pinnock 2000: 1398). In two of the sealings showing the ruler with the peaked cap (Teissier 1994: nos. 529a, 527) *mekum* of Ebla is mentioned in the legend (Figs. 18, 19). *Mekum*, the Eblaite form of the West Semitic *ma(l)ku > me(l)ku*, was the dynastic title of Eblaite rulers commencing with the end of the Ur III dynasty (Owen and Veenker 1987: 271–275; Tonietti 1997: 239–241; Archi 2002: 25–27).¹⁹ It seems there were two

¹⁸ Dépôt d’Offrandes A, dated 2000–1850 BCE, see Dunand 1950–1958: Pl. CXXXII, no. 16700.

¹⁹ See, however, Kühne (1998: 313–314, and previous literature) who, following M. Heltzer and I.J. Gelb, interprets *me-ki-im Eb-la-im* as a causative participle from **qwm*, ‘to rise’, ‘who raises [the Ebleans]’. For Ebla and its ruler *meqim Ebla[im]* mentioned in the Kültepe documents see Nashef 1991: 38.

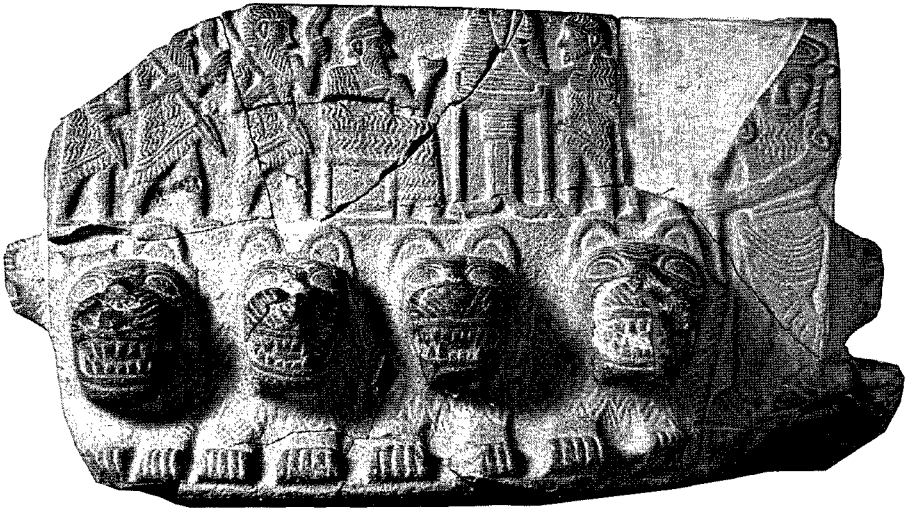


Fig. 17. Basalt basin, Ebla (Amiet *et al.* 1998: 156, no. 30).

types of inscribed seals showing the *mekum* at Ebla. The first type shows the ruler with a peaked cap worshipping a god; these were dynastic seals. Thus, the seal used to imprint sealing 529a (Teissier 1994), depicting the ruler with peaked helmet paying homage to a god, belonged to *Ib-Damu, mekim Ebla(im)* (Fig. 19), that is to a ruler of Ebla (Matthiae 1994: 330, n. 10; Marchetti 2003: 165, n. 13). It was partly re-cut, its new inscription indicating that it now belonged to another *mekum*.²⁰ However, when homage is being paid to the king, he is shown seated with cup in hand (Fig. 18; Teissier 1994: nos. 526, 527 inscribed “beloved of *mekum*”). These latter, which are seals of the second type, carry on a tradition that was established for the Ur III state bureaucracy, as has been shown by Winter (1986, 1987). Therefore, the ruler with the peaked cap should be identified with *mekum* of Ebla. It has also been suggested that *mekum* of Ebla may be one and the same as *mk'i* from Qedem in the 12th-dynasty Sinuhe story, which tells of a Syrian prince who was on good terms with Egypt. Thus, Sinuhe’s Qedem, which the scribe differentiated from Retenu and *Kpni*/Byblos in his description of Syria, may be identified with Ebla (Scandone-Matthiae 1997a).

The Eblaite thrones, however, vary. On the basin from Temple D, on the Byblos gold plaque and on the ‘Syro-Cappadocian’ sealings, the king and the queen²¹ sit on wickerwork thrones (Teissier 1993: nos. 9, 10, 11, 13 = 1994: nos. 526, 527, 539,

²⁰ The new inscription reads: *Urda me-ki-im* (Teissier 1994: no. 529b).

²¹ Matthiae 1997: 400–404 interprets the female figure as a priestess because Temple D was dedicated to the goddess Ishtar.

563, [549?]; Matthiae 1995: 421–422; Metzger 1985a: Pl. 104: 1090A), whereas on the basin from Temple B and on an unprovenanced somewhat later seal he sits on a backless stool (Teissier 1993: no. 12).²² Further iconographic details indicate a Northwest Syrian workshop for the seals (Teissier 1993: 607; Toniatti 1997: 226). The seals used to imprint these sealings were made in a regional Syrian style that may be attributed to Ebla and point to Ebla's role in the Assyrian colonies trade.

A hippopotamus ivory amulet from the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats at Ebla of the second half of the 18th century BCE, its shape inspired by Egyptian Middle Kingdom magical wands, combines feast and adoration (Matthiae 1995: 505). The front shows a bare-headed male sitting on a folding chair at a laden table fashionable at Ebla. He is raising a cup and shouldering a pastoral staff, an Old Syrian royal attribute (Matthiae 1989: 369) reminiscent of the Egyptian crook. The situla-carrying attendant is rendered similar to the attendants on the Basin from Temple D and the attendants on the Acemhöyük box. The banquet is held in the presence of two frontal naked figures, female and male.²³ The two adorants of the bull with human head carry fenestrated axes; the one on the right also carries a pastoral staff. The two squatting monkeys in the adoration scene are of Egyptian descent and find parallels in the adoring monkeys on Hotepibra's ceremonial mace (around 1760 BCE) from the same tomb (Matthiae 1995: 464–465; 1997: 406; 1997: 397–398) and in Syrian glyptic (Pinnock 2000: 1398). Compared with monumental art, such as the basins, this amulet exhibits Ebla's (and the Levant's) penchant for things Egyptian in the Middle Bronze II, that found its outlet in miniature art, such as the Egyptianizing ivory inlays from Palace P, dated 1750–1700 BCE. Among the Egyptian motifs in these inlays, divine figures imbued with a local meaning are most prominent. Indeed, Egyptian motifs modified by the Syrian artists were part of the Syrian iconographic heritage as early as the Middle Bronze II (Scandone-Matthiae 1990: 148). The integration of Egyptian motifs into the minor arts bears witness to the complex and age-old relations that linked Egypt and Syria-Palestine and exemplifies Ebla's role as the crucible where the encounter took place between Syro-Mesopotamian tradition and Egyptian iconography.

In view of the parallels quoted for the Acemhöyük box, one may wonder where this luxury object was made. When the box was first published in 1976, Nimet Özgüç suggested it had been sent to Cappadocia from northern Syria or southeast Anatolia—

²² On the basin, this backless stool is identical to the stool of royal figures whose heads had been intentionally removed; see Mazzoni 1980; Beck 2002: 83–83. On one sealing (Teissier 1994: no. 546) the ruler with the peaked cap sits on a fleece-covered backless stool of Ur III iconography that rests on the back of a recumbent lion.

²³ Perhaps the two naked figures are the king's first-born children, the priestess and the crown prince, appearing in ritual nudity. See Pinnock 2000: 1399; 2001: 31, with previous literature.



Fig. 18. Ruler with peaked cap enthroned with cup, seal impression, Kültepe (Teissier 1993: Fig. 11).

where Syrian and Anatolian traditions converged—perhaps Carchemish, which maintained close contact with Acemhöyük (Özgüç 1976: 559). Machteld Mellink (1993: 425–426) proposed that the box might have been produced in the palace workshops of Acemhöyük, which also produced the Pratt ivories, where Syrian and Egyptian traits, perhaps promoted by North-Syrian craftsmen working for the Anatolian king and training his apprentices, were incorporated in prestige goods. Based on the new evidence from Ebla, I dare to suggest that the box was created there. Since it is evident that a number of cultures shared the same motifs, and probably meaning or a related meaning as well, because the theme itself was prestigious, it is the question of style



Fig. 19. Seal of *Mekum*, seal impressions, Kültepe (Teissier 1993: Figs. 4–5).

rather than iconography that makes the difference between the various representations regarding attribution (Winter 1988: 197). The uniqueness of the studded box with its densely-packed miniature friezes of human and animal files within ivory works from Acemhöyük and Kültepe as well as its divergence from glyptic styles of the period in Anatolia, which show no Egyptian stylistics whatsoever, indeed point to a North-Syrian workshop, perhaps Ebla (Matthiae 2000: 395), where the presence of Egyptian artefacts is attested as early as the third millennium BCE.²⁴

Moving south and forward in time, a fragment of an alabaster jar from the palace of Ugarit shows a domestic drinking scene reminiscent of Egyptian banquet scenes (Fig. 20). Under a canopy topped by Syrian ibex heads a female faces a seated male. She gracefully pours him a drink from the flask in her right hand. In her left hand she holds a folded towel. Between them is a table with a bull-shaped head cup. The hieroglyphic inscription identifies the male as “The great one (lord) of the land of Ugarit, Niqmaddu”. The woman must be his wife. Her frontal chest with a side-viewed breast, the flowers stuck in her headdress, the Egyptian-style flask, foreign in the vessel repertoire of Syria-Palestine, the folded towel she offers the king in what seems to be drawn from an 18th-dynasty pattern book and the woman’s dress lend the tableau an all-Egyptian appearance, but the details betray the jar as a Syrian emulation: the ribbons of the princess’s dress and her earring are non-Egyptian. The ibex frieze replacing the ubiquitous uraei frieze of royal Egyptian iconography indicates a Syrian environment. Most likely, Niqmaddu II, contemporary of Akhenaten, ordered this jar depicting himself and his Syrian wife in an Egyptian style ritual (Desroches-Noblecourt 1956; Eaton-Krauss 1985; Kuhrt 1995: 305–309; Feldman 2002: 17).²⁵ The Egyptianizing style of this alabaster vase reflects the same tendency to create Egyptian-style jewelry

²⁴ A stone lamp and a vase with inscriptions of Khephren and Pepi I found in Palace G (Pinnock 1988: 110; Scandone Matthiae 1988: 67–71; Matthiae 1995: 282–283). The presence of Egyptian artefacts reaching Ebla was explained in several alternative ways: through the sacking of maritime towns in contact with Egypt, via Syrian ports acting as intermediaries, where gifts or trade objects were exchanged between the port towns and Ebla, or where messengers from Ebla and Egypt may have met; as a result of direct contact between Ebla and the pharaonic courts, as royal gifts or private items of trade (Pinnock 1989: 43–44); or through close contacts between Asiatics living in the Delta and their kin in the Levant (Ben-Tor 1994: 11). The ceremonial mace of the Pharaoh Hotepibra (first part of the 13th dynasty) from the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats may corroborate the postulation of direct contact between Ebla and the pharaonic court. One of this pharaoh’s titles is “The Son of the Asiatic”, perhaps son of a chief of the Asiatic tribes who emigrated from Western Asia and settled in the Eastern Delta by the end of the 12th dynasty. Perhaps this tribe had some affiliation with Ebla, and the royal gift was sent by one of these immigrants, who had become king of Egypt, to his home country, as a token of remembrance (Scandone-Matthiae 1997b: 416, 419–420).

²⁵ For the possibility of the royal lady being Pisidqi, Niqmaddu’s spouse or an Egyptian bride, sent from the court of Egypt, and on the relationship between Egypt and Ugarit in the 14th century, see Singer 1999: 625–626.

in Byblos, or the creation of Egyptian-style inlays at Ebla during the Middle Bronze Age (Bryan 1996: 60): the Levant appreciated and commodified Egyptian motifs for the sense of style and high craftsmanship of Egyptian royal workshops that turned out goods of equal or higher quality than any other ancient culture (Lilyquist 1998: 27). In turn the Levantine sense of connoisseurship of foreign input motivated creative talent that produced the alabaster vessel and eventually the superbly refined Late Bronze Canaanite ivories.

Arriving in Canaan, the three monuments discussed in conjunction with the banquet theme are the Late Bronze Age ivory carvings from Tell el-Far'ah (S) and Megiddo.

The Tell el-Far'ah ivory panels once adorned a piece of furniture, perhaps a bed, and represent a hunting feast (Fig. 21 and back cover). Compositionally, they are miniature representations characteristic of New Kingdom scenes of fowling and fishing in a papyrus marsh²⁶ in which an Aegean-style bull has been integrated (Frankfort 1954: n. 110 p. 253), combined with a lively banquet, dancing and double reed flute playing scene employing Egyptian dress and iconography of the 18th–20th dynasties,²⁷ to carry a Western Asiatic agenda. Based on parallels from Egyptian iconography, the ivory was dated to the 14th century BCE (Petrie 1930: 19; Liebowitz 1980: 169; Markoe 1990: 18), but it has recently been suggested that it dates from the 12th century BCE (Bryan 1996: 62–69). A nobleman, cupping a drinking bowl and grasping a lotus flower, is seated on a folding throne the legs of which end in 19th- or 20th-dynasty style bovine or goat hooves (Sweeney 1998). The princess pouring his drink from a situla, as known from 18th-dynasty pouring scenes, employs a later type situla (Bryan 1996: 69).

The Mesopotamian topos of the battle and its aftermath recurs in the Megiddo ivories from the treasury of the palace, Stratum VIIA of the 13th–12th centuries²⁸—on four sequential plaques (Loud 1939: nos. 159–162, Pl. 33) carved in relief and in an incised panel. It is developed in full detail on the four plaques (Fig. 22), where each pair is summed up in a culmination scene reminiscent of both side panels of the 'Standard of Ur'. The one pair shows a chariot battle with galloping horses accelerating to full speed, their legs aloft, as in Egyptian renderings, trampling fallen victims and then the return from the battle and the presentation of prisoners. The other pair shows the preparation of food and feasting. The prince with cup and lotus flower is offered a

²⁶ For New Kingdom miniature scenes in the marshes engraved on metal drinking bowls see Simpson 1959. Although a banquet scene is not incorporated into the marsh scene, the placement of a marsh scene on drinking equipment may hint at a specific occasion, namely a banquet following a successful hunt, during which such bowls were used.

²⁷ Compare female musicians and banquet wall painting from the tomb of the Reckoner of Grain, Nebamun, on the west bank at Thebes, 1390 (Malek 2003: 159).

²⁸ For an overview of the dating see Markoe 1990: 18–22; Bryan 1996: 47.

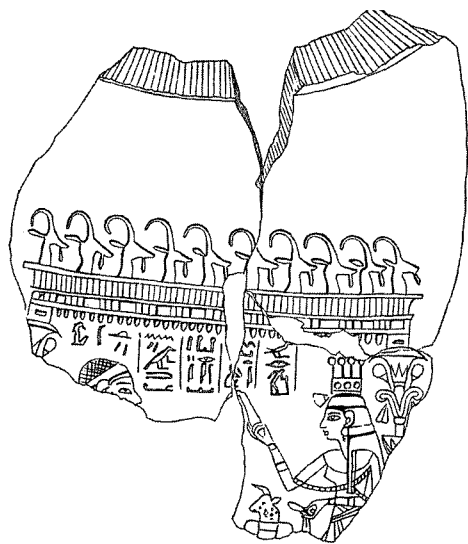


Fig. 20. Pouring scene, alabaster vessel, Ugarit (Desroches-Noblecourt 1956: Fig. 118).

towel worn on the shoulder of a male attendant,²⁹ an overseer stands in a nonchalant Egyptian posture, and servants attend pairs of celebrating dignitaries. The left-hand-side scene shows the prince in audience.

On the incised panel (Fig. 23a and front cover; Loud 1939: no. 2, Pl. 4), the return from battle and the triumphal feast are compressed into a single monument, where the successive episodes are juxtaposed with only a hint of delimitation in the form of a triad of papyrus plants, which, in Canaan, have definitely lost their Egyptian significance as a hieroglyph for Lower Egypt, perhaps retaining

some related meaning of regeneration. In the scene on the right, the victorious prince drives two naked Shasu captives in front of his chariot. In the scene on the left, at a following moment in the royal court, the prince, seated on a sphinx throne, raises a cup to his lips and grasps a lotus blossom whose stem is also held by a standing female wearing a mural headdress,³⁰ who offers him a towel placed on her shoulder. Behind her a female musician in Canaanite attire plays a nine-stringed lyre. A bird (dove?) with outstretched wings flies below the lyre, another one pecks at the ground beneath the throne, while two others flutter behind the throne. Two servants carry drinking cups. A krater, topped by a tray with two drinking vessels in the shape of animal heads—one a gazelle and the other lion-shaped—stands between them.³¹ To the casual observer these ivories may seem Egyptian in style, inspired by the art of the New Kingdom. However, a Near Eastern cultural identity lies beneath this attempt to graft Egyptian iconographic and stylistic features onto these monuments. The theme is, as observed, Near Eastern, including the battle, the victorious return from battle, preparation for and the celebration of the victory feast (Liebowitz 1980).

²⁹ For textual evidence of manners of wearing a towel, see Ziffer 1999: 42–43; 2001: 43–44.

³⁰ For mural crowns for goddesses and mortal females in Hattusha and Ugarit in Late Bronze contexts see Nougayrol 1955: 182–183; Paul 1967; Hoffner 1969; Börker-Klähn 1997.

³¹ For a comprehensive discussion of Canaanite head-cups, see Zevulun 1987. For the appearance of cups in Canaan in the 18th century BCE in connection with a new tradition that emerged in northern Syria and Anatolia at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, see Zevulun 1986–87. For textual terminology of head-cups in Hittite sources see Güterbock 1983: 212–214; Güterbock and Kendall 1995: 55–56.

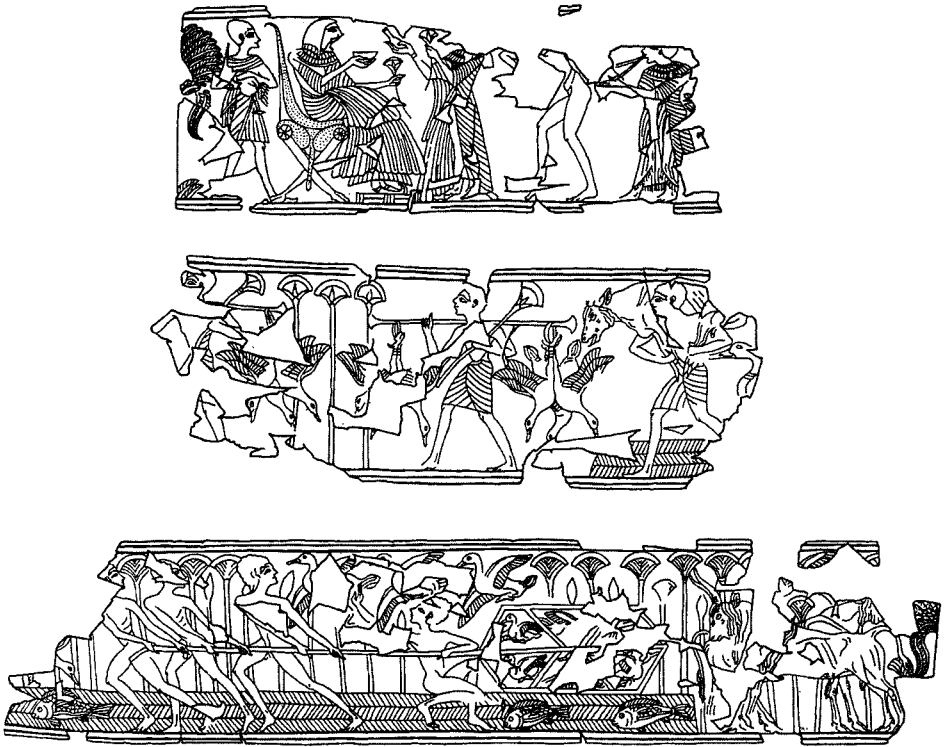


Fig. 21. Hunting banquet of a Canaanite ruler, Ivory plaques, Tell el Far'ah (S) (Barnett 1982: Fig. 10).

In 19th–20th dynasties monumental art the military aspect showing real campaigns is treated in great detail, whereas the victory banquet is not an integral part of the narrative. Moreover, in Egypt the presentation of prisoners and booty is always in the sight of the god (Bryan 1996: 73; Heinz 2001: 184–195), whereas the Asiatic presentation of enemy captives is at the banquet, in the presence of the king only.³² The lotus flower, held by the ruler on the Far'ah ivories and on the banquet plaque of the four sequential plaques, as well as on the incised ivory, is, again, an Egyptian-style guise for the Mesopotamian vegetal sceptre. In Egypt lotus blossoms are indeed an indispensable part of the banquet. Men and women carry them and bury their noses among the scented petals of the lotus blossom, symbolizing the renewal of life and the concept of love. The combination of cup and lotus flower is indigenous to Canaan. The rare appearance of this combination in Egyptian art, such as the depiction of Nefertiti and Akenaten, where the queen pours a drink from a situla

³² One may, however, argue that the winged disk hovering above the triumphant prince on the incised plaque evokes divine presence at the return from battle.

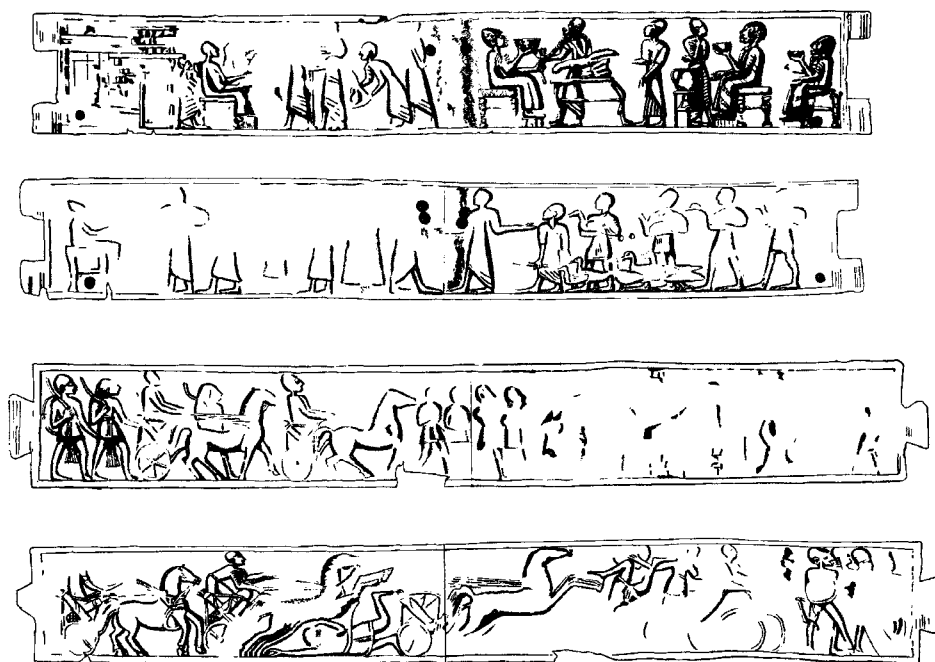


Fig. 22. Battle and banquet scenes, ivory plaques, Megiddo (Loud 1939: nos. 159–162). From: Liebowitz 1980.

into the chalice held in the king's right hand, while in his left hand he holds a lotus of regeneration, obviously has to do with the Egyptian belief in the creative power of the lotus, which came to be associated with the concept of love (Manniche 1999: 98–99). This tableau of love reiterates the ubiquitous image type of the Egyptian banquet well known from New Kingdom art and love songs. In Canaan the lotus took on a life of its own and functioned as a vehicle for a native Western Asiatic perception of royal attributes. On the incised Megiddo ivory the prince grasps the lotus, while the lady touches its stem, establishing a relationship between the two through the lotus, which must be connected with both mutual tenderness and the Western Asiatic image pair of the plant sceptre and throne discussed above. The bearded prince, a mirror image (except for the attire) of the triumphant prince returning in his chariot, is enthroned on a seat supported by fully-modeled standing female sphinxes with multiple curls tucked behind the ear, whose legs function as the legs of the throne. His feet rest upon a footstool.³³ Their erect wings are characteristic of non-Egyptianizing sphinxes already known from Middle Bronze Age Syrian seals (Teissier 1996: 80). The wings are, however, styled after an Aegean

³³ For the word pair *ks²/hdm* in Ugaritic and the Bible see Avishur 1984: 375–376.



Fig. 23a. Victorious homecoming and banquet scene, ivory inlay, Megiddo (Loud 1939: no. 2b).

model, fan-shaped, with two overlapping registers of angular tipped feathers (Kantor 1956: Figs. 2, 3; Kantor 1960: 18–19; Porada 1973: 358, 362, Fig. 3; Poursat 1977: Pls. XII: 1, XVI: 3, XVIII: 1, 4; Gachet 1992: 73; Feldman 2002: 22–23). The sphinxes are not shown, as in Egyptian (Helck 1955: 3–4, Fig. g, 10)³⁴ or later Phoenician art in striding, but in a standing position. Therefore, only two legs are shown instead of four (Metzger 1985a: 259–279, catalogue: 236; Gubel 1987: 52–53). An identical sphinx throne of a frequently overlooked ivory statuette fragment of a seated figure, also from Megiddo, survives (Fig. 23b; Loud 1939: Pl. 4: 3a–e; Metzger 1985: Pl. 113: 1182), which may represent a class of figurines seated on a sphinx throne (Liebowitz 1987: 11), a Canaanite version of the seated ruler on a sphinx-less throne with cup statues first observed at Ebla (Matthiae 1992; Beck 2002: 83–84) and Qatna (Fales 2004: Fig. 4).³⁵

Standing sphinxes also support the throne on the Ahiram sarcophagus (Fig. 24a, b), providing a stylistic attribution of the scene in the

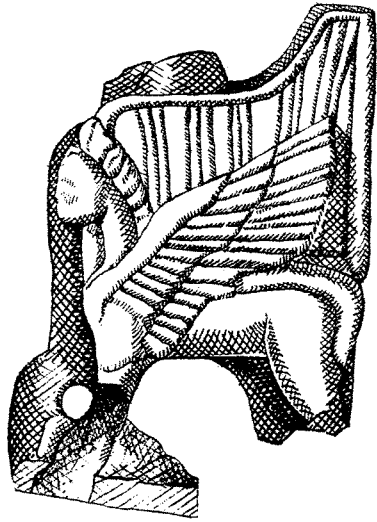


Fig. 23b. Figure seated on a sphinx throne, ivory statuette fragment, Megiddo (Loud 1939: no. 3a).

³⁴ An ostrakon with a representation of a female sphinx with multiple teats and a Mycenaean hairdo.

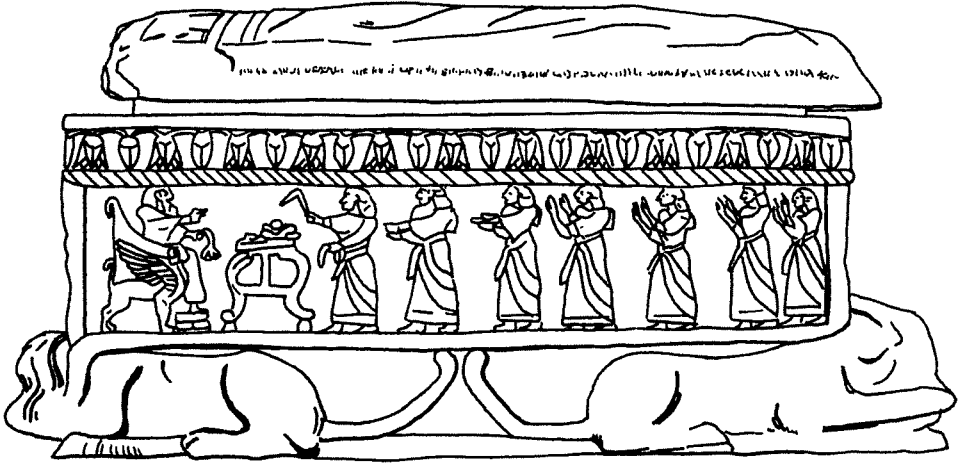
³⁵ Mayer-Opificius has proposed that Idrimi's throne was also flanked by standing sphinxes (1981: 282–283).

13th–12th century (Hachmann 1967: 106–107; Mayer Opificius 1981: n. 7; 1993; Gubel 1987: 51; Rehm 2004: 62–70).³⁶ The enthroned king holds both cup and lotus flower (Fig. 24b), but the lotus blossom is shown drooping, signifying not the lotus's life-giving powers embodied in the living flower, but withering and demise (Van Loon 1986), an appropriate representation of the deceased king on his coffin (Figs. 24b, e). The withering lotus is yet another Canaanite pictorial convention (Giveon 1959: 59), where an Egyptian visual form was wedded to the West Semitic idea of the vegetal sceptre, this time representing bereavement and widowhood, in other words death and un-productivity, as in KTU 1.23, where the lord El grasps in one hand the *ḥt tkl*, the *ḥt ulmn* in the other (Parker 1997: 208: 8–9; Wyatt 1992). On the table cakes are heaped up as well as meat represented by a calf's head. A fanning attendant offers the king a towel. His fan or flywhisk could well be a Levantine emulation of a New Kingdom flywhisk consisting of a single horsetail emerging directly from a handle, actual examples of which were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (Fischer 1977: 84: c). A letter from Ugarit, dispatched from Egypt to the Levantine city, enumerates 800 such flywhisks sent by Merenptah to the king of Ugarit (Lackenbacher 1995: 81). Two attendants carry bowls, and the following four men salute the king in the Egyptian gesture of upraised and turned-out hands.

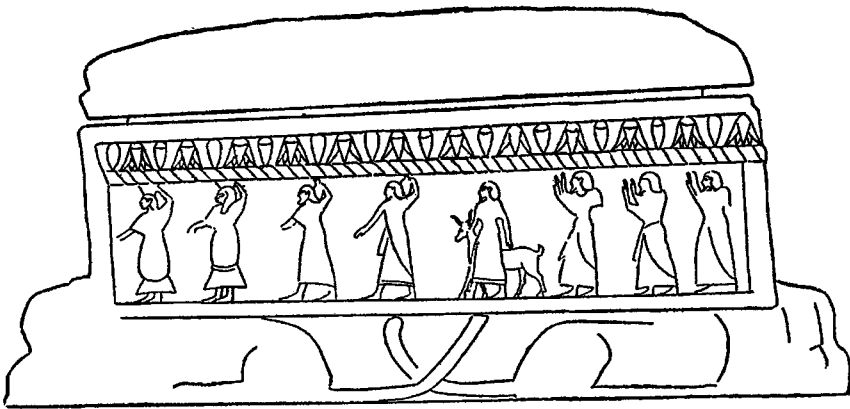
The opposite side of the sarcophagus exhibits a procession of provision bearers: two women in mourners' apparel with covered chests and baskets on their heads, two men with jars on their shoulders, a male leading a goat and three saluting figures (Fig. 24c). The file of males paying homage to the dead king is reminiscent of Asiatic princes wearing a wrapped garment in 18th–19th dynasties representations (Chéhab 1970–1971: 113; Seidel 1998: 266), as well as of the garment of the princely figure at the bottom of the Canaanite ivory baton from Megiddo (Loud 1939: no. 125, Pl. 22). On both narrow sides of the sarcophagus bare-chested female mourners are depicted (Fig. 24d), their hair style perhaps a survival of that of the Asian women in the Tomb of Khnumhotep at Beni Hassan (Aimé-Giron 1943: 307). Two are shown tearing at their hair, the other two beating and scratching their chests, wearing a robe whose upper part is torn and falls down over the skirt. Though reminiscent of Egyptian mourners,³⁷ this representation is identical to the pictogram of the bare-chested woman on the

³⁶ In *Phoenicians* (2000: 144), Markoe re-dated the Ahirom sarcophagus he previously attributed to ca. 1000 BCE (1990: 19–22), to the 12th century. Traces of an older pseudo-hieroglyphic inscription have been detected on the sarcophagus, hinting at a secondary use (Sader 1998: 126).

³⁷ A fine Egyptian example of a burial ritual in a shaft tomb is depicted on an 18th-dynasty ostrakon (Hachmann 1993: 35). It shows a burial chamber divided into three rooms, the lowest one reachable by a flight of stairs. In the main room two people stand near the deceased, who has just been lowered into the room through the shaft. Outside the shaft a priest is seen libating. He is accompanied by four mourning women, three of whom are tearing out their hair.

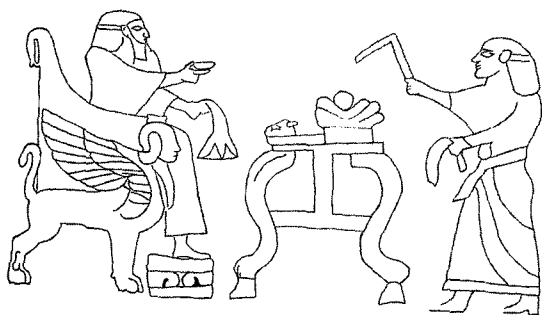


a

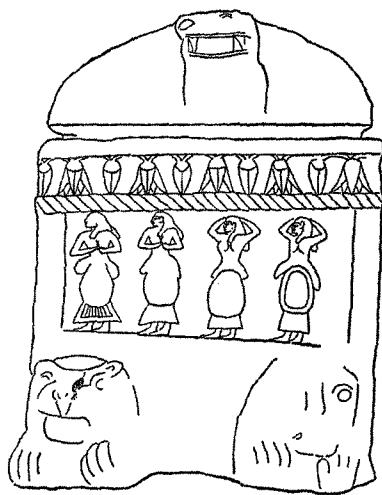


c

- Fig. 24a. Sarcophagus of Ahiram, Byblos (Amiet *et al.* 1981: 156, no.34).
 Fig. 24b. Dead king banqueting, sarcophagus of Ahiram (Porada 1973: Fig. 5).
 Fig. 24c. Bearers of provisions, sarcophagus of Ahiram (Aimé-Giron 1943: Fig. 72).
 Fig. 24d. Mourning women, sarcophagus of Ahiram (Aimé-Giron 1943: Fig. 73).
 Fig. 24e. Dead king with drooping lotus flower, lid of sarcophagus of Ahiram (Porada 1973: Fig. 4).



b



d



e



Fig. 25. Mourning woman, Phaistos disk (Börker-Klähn 1999: Fig. f6).

Phaistos disk (Fig. 25; Börker-Klähn 1999: 62–65), providing yet another chronological anchor for a second-millennium BCE date of the scene. The cone shaped supports of the schematic lion-pawed table legs, which have been taken as yet another proof for a 10th century date, as allegedly they are not known for Western Asiatic tables before the first millennium BCE (Porada 1973: 362), are known from actual furniture, albeit stretchers, from Middle Bronze Age Jericho tombs (Ziffer 1990: 20*, Figs. 16, 19 on pp. 23–35).³⁸ The two pairs of lions carrying the coffin rely on a North-Syrian tradition evidenced by the lion supports of the Ebla basalt basin (Temple B), which was also adopted in Hittite cult basins, e.g., the block supported by a pair of lions from the entrance of Temple I at Boğazköy (Orthmann 1964: 226, n. 40).

Although a tradition of animals serving as the thrones for divinities is well established since the mid-third millennium BCE, the Palestinian sphinx throne stands as a unique Canaanite innovation. One wonders whether the placement of the female sphinx in proximity to the prince's throne on the Acemhöyük box is a coincidence. This particular elaboration of the theme in Egyptianizing style has no parallels in any other art group in the Levant, and therefore may have been produced by a local workshop (Liebowitz 1987: 6), perhaps a workshop that operated in the palace itself (Margueron 1979: 20–25). Also unique to the southern Levant is the replacement of the branch, the original form of the royal sceptre, with the Egyptian lotus flower in the second half of the second millennium BCE.

All the monuments discussed have the banquet theme in common as an image-type, consistently combined to create vignettes that, while related, are non-narrative but related to indigenous concerns of the Levantine elites. These elites emulated Egyptian iconography, which was associated with strong, centralized kingship, combining it with Levantine details as well as Aegean elements in the spirit of their era, and investing them with local meanings.

³⁸ On the 8th-century North Syrian ivory pyxis from Well AJ in the NW Palace at Nimrud the sphinx is shown in striding position. For a comparative study of the Ahiram sarcophagus and the Nimrud pyxis, see Muyldermans 1989. Recently Sass (2005: 75–82) has argued for a 9th–8th century date for the sarcophagus.

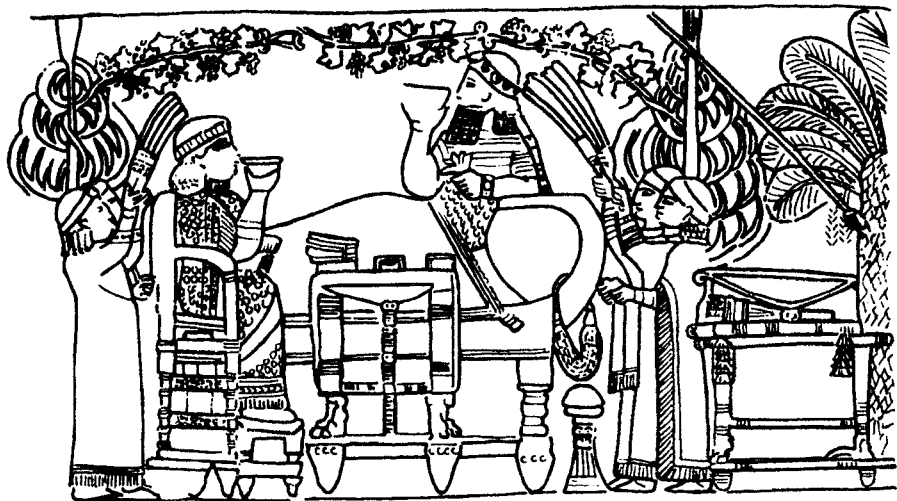


Fig. 26. Assurbanipal's feast under the grapevine, Nineveh (Amiet *et al.* 1994: 113, no. 118).

FINALE: CANAANITE FORM IN AN ASSYRIAN VESSEL

In the context of the victory banquet the lotus flower as a royal attribute surfaces in Assurbanipal's feast under the grape-laden vine bower (Fig. 26), no longer an ideogram of a victory in abstract, but embedded in the historical event of the victory over Elam, symbolized by Teumman's decapitated and scalped head hanging from a coniferous tree (not in Fig. 26; Deller 1987). Assurbanipal reclining on his bed-throne holds a Canaanite-derived lotus blossom in his left hand, while in his right hand he raises a cup. The queen on her throne holds a cup and a vegetal element. The cup and the king's face (as well as the queen's nose and chin) had been willfully damaged in an act of propagandistic iconoclasm by the conquerors of Nineveh in 612 (Nylander 1999). The destruction of the king's cup must have meant that the emblem had, to both the Assyrians and their enemies, a specific, powerful significance, far beyond the festive drinking on the occasion of the victory and the relaxed family union in private. This particular iconogram, *the king and the cup under the vine arbour*, was appropriated from Elamite seal designs of the early second millennium BCE denoting prosperity and well being (Stronach 1995: 190; Potts 1999: Fig. 5.7: 9).³⁹ On the day of their wrath the once defeated Elamite conquerors of Nineveh took their revenge by mutilating the king's face and by breaking the Assyrian cup of kingship.

³⁹ For the importance of the overarching vine in the royal imagery from Achaemenid period Persia down to the Muslim conquest, see Goldstein 1984–1985, and previous references there.

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