



A NOTE ON AN AMENHOTEP III PLAQUE FROM TEL BURNA¹

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ABSTRACT

The discovery of a plaque associated to the New Kingdom at Tel Burna in the southern Levant augments archaeological evidence to enhance historical understanding of the Late Bronze Age occupation at the site.

The plaque which is the focus of this brief article was found at the site of Tel Burna, a multi-period tell located in the southern Levant on the northern bank of the Guvrin River. Historically, this part of the lowlands that precedes the ascent to the Judean Hills is termed the Shephelah. Tel Burna holds a prime location in the Shephelah, situated in the center of a historically active region surrounded by the remains of ancient tells and villages dating from the earliest periods of settlement in the region. Remarkably, despite the profusion of archaeological activity in the area, the characteristic tell-like form quite visible to all who passed it and the exposed remains of substantial fortifications, the site was never excavated before the commencement of the present project in 2010, under the directorship of Itzhaq Shai and Joe Uziel.³

DISCOVERY OF THE PLAQUE

Preceding the first season of excavation, an extensive surface survey was conducted, the results of which have been published.⁴ As part of a supplementary assessment, circular test pits (1 m diameter and 0.30 m deep) were excavated throughout the survey fields.⁵ The contents of each test pit were fully sifted in order to remove any bias

based on preference of pottery types. The plaque (No. 211111) that is the focus of the current study was found in one of the pits located on the eastern slope of the tell. While the plaque was not discovered in a clear archaeological context—in fact it would be best classified as a surface find—the artifact itself bears historical significance. Its interpretation augments our present understanding of the Late Bronze Age settlement at Tel Burna.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLAQUE

The object (Figure 1a-b) is a bifacial rectangular plaque, belonging to Keel's Type II,⁶ steatite, cream color with remnants of blue glaze, 17mm (length), 12mm (width), 6mm (height/thick).

Face A (Figure 2a): Horizontally arranged, the central motif consists of a human-headed royal sphinx, with a false beard and a uraeus protruding from its head, facing right and trampling over an anthropomorphic enemy. Above there are the titles *nfr* (F35) *ntr* (R8) – “perfect god” - and *ḥkꜣt* (S38) – “sovereign” – and possibly a disc. In front of the sphinx there are *rꜥ* (N5), *nb* (V30) below it, and farther



Figure 1a and 1b: Tell Burna Plaque (photo by Laura E. Wright).

below the remains of a third sign, the upper part of a feather (H6); taken together, these three signs stand for the name *nb-mꜣꜥt-rꜥ*, the praenomen of Amenhotep III.⁷

Face B (Figure 2b): Horizontally arranged, on the right there is figure of the mummiform god Ptah, a huge *sꜣ* sign (G39)—“son”—is located in the center, and behind it the name of Amun-Re (*jmn-rꜥ*).

PARALLEL

An almost identical parallel comes from the Matouk collection.⁸

DISCUSSION

The motif of the sphinx trampling an enemy with a throne name of a pharaoh was common during the mid-18th Dynasty. The earliest example found in Canaan, a scarab of Thutmose III found in an unknown context in Tel Gezer (Figure 3), depicts a sphinx trampling over two enemies, the royal cartouche, located behind it, and the title *ntr nfr* (“perfect god”) *nb tꜣwj* (“lord of the two lands”) above. Depictions from the reign of Amenhotep II have a single trampled enemy, while the royal titles varied: a full version appears on a bifacial plaque from a LBIIA tomb in Tell el-Ajjul (Figure 4). An additional plaque from the same site (Figure 5) shows the same composition, but the royal title includes only two signs —*ntr nfr*; and a third example, from unknown context at Tel Lachish, has a falcon-headed sphinx trampling a single enemy, accompanied by two cartouches of Amenhotep II, with no royal titles.⁹

The second motif is unique, though still belongs to a known tradition from the days of Amenhotep III. As with

the trampling sphinx (above), the combination of the throne name and Ptah also finds its roots in the days of Amenhotep II, shown on plaques from Tell el-Ajjul (Figure 6)¹⁰ and Tel Lachish.¹¹ Dated to the reign of Amenhotep III, a plaque from Tell el-Ajjul (Figure 7)¹² depicts the cartouche with a royal sphinx accompanied by a winged uraeus. A dome-shaped plaque from a tomb near Shechem depicts the cartouche on one side and the image of Ptah on the other,¹³ while a bifacial plaque from the same site depicts the cartouche accompanied by a huge *sꜣ* sign and the name of Amun-Re and the image of Ptah in front of a *djed*-pillar and a sign of life.¹⁴ Similar motifs appear on a plaque from Tel Gezer,¹⁵ with the cartouche, the *sꜣ* sign and a disc on one side, and another cartouche accompanied with the title “*mꜣj Pth, nb mꜣꜥt*,” “beloved of Ptah, lord of truth.”

CONCLUSION

While the object was not derived from a clear archaeological context, its significance contributes to our tentative dating of the Late Bronze Age occupation at Tel Burna. Thus far, excavations have exposed a single-phase 13th century BCE public building with evidence of ritual activities located just above bedrock on the western shelf of the tell. The identification of the plaque with Amenhotep III suggests an earlier presence. Albeit, one can claim that the context of this plaque is insufficient as a definitive marker for 14th century BCE occupation, and that it is not uncommon for such objects to be treated as a sort of heirloom outlasting the reign of Amenhotep III; however, the discovery of a LHIIIA bowl¹⁶ in debris left by looters of a burial cave on the eastern spur of the tell augments our suggestion the Late Bronze Age presence at Tel Burna predates the 13th century B.C.E.

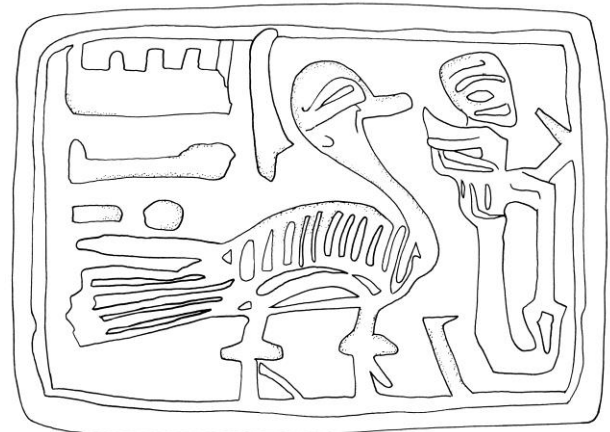
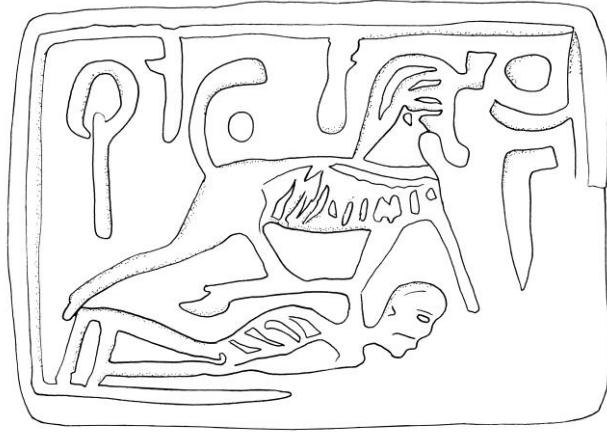


Figure 2a and 2b: Tel Burna Plaque (drawing by Glyniss Fawkes).



Figure 3: A scarab from Tel Gezer (after Keel 2013: Geser no. 556; Stiftung Bibel+Orient Freiburg CH).



Figure 4: A plaque from Tell el-Ajjul (after: Keel 1997: Tell el-'Ağul no. 266; Stiftung Bibel+Orient Freiburg CH).



Figure 5: A plaque from Tell el-Ajjul (after: Keel 1997: Tell el-‘Ağul no. 492; Stiftung Bibel+Orient Freiburg CH).

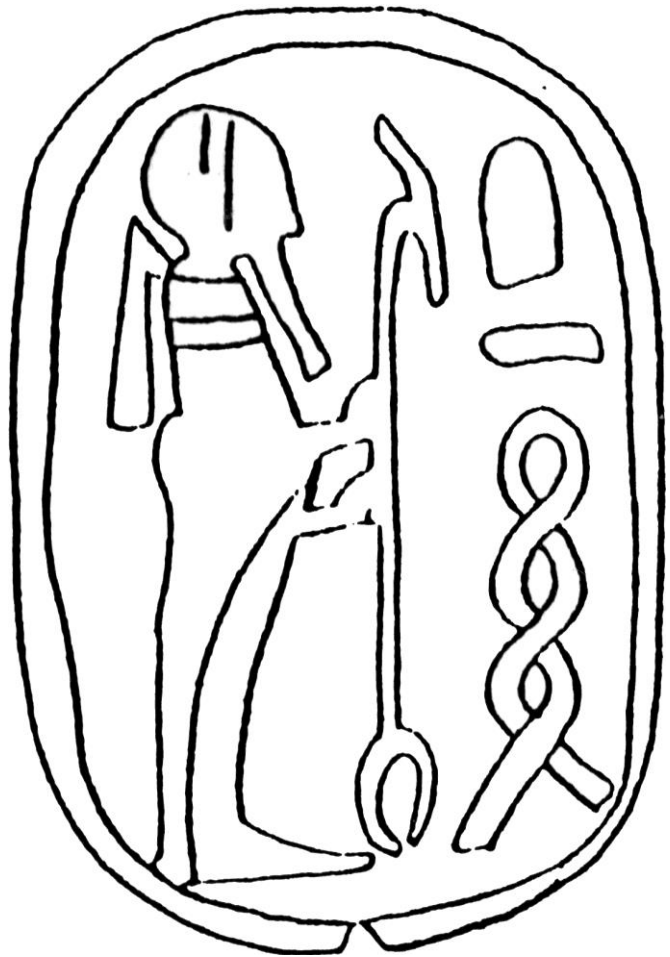


Figure 6: A plaque from Tell el-Ajjul (after: Keel 1997: Tell el-‘Ağul no. 272; Stiftung Bibel+Orient Freiburg CH).

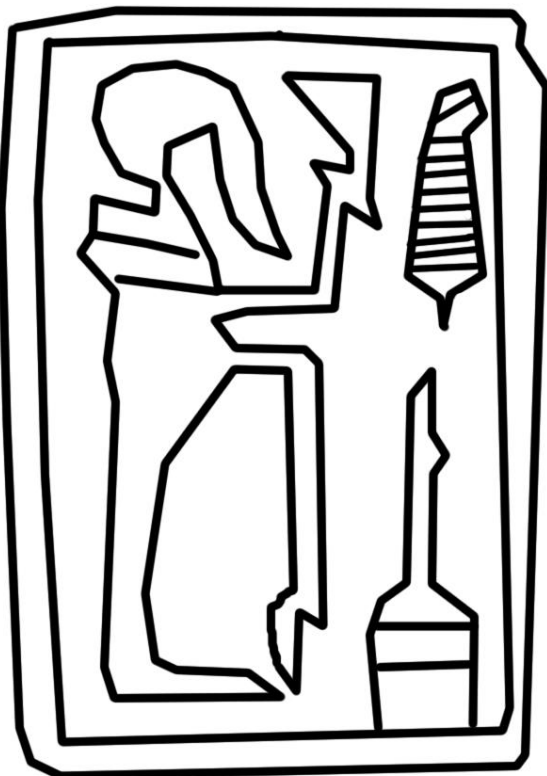


Figure 7: A plaque from Tell el-Ajjul (after: Keel 1997: Tell el-‘Ağul no. 847; Stiftung Bibel+Orient Freiburg CH).

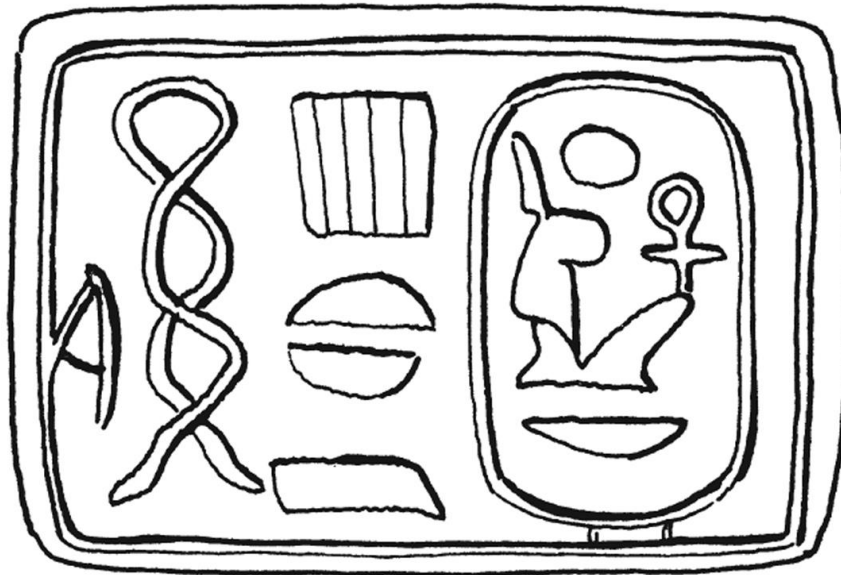


Figure 8: A plaque from Tel Gezer (after Keel 2013: Geser no. 676; Stiftung Bibel+Orient Freiburg CH).

NOTES

- ¹ The authors would like to thank Daphna Ben Tor for her valuable comments on various parts of this paper, and the Estates Committee of the Israeli Ministry of Justice.
- ² Ernest S. Frerichs Fellow/Program Coordinator, AIAR.
- ³ The Tel Burna Archaeological Project is directed by Itzhaq Shai. The discovery of the plaque was made in November 2011 by students of the Master's College who volunteered at Tel Burna as part of a semester program study in Israel (IBEX).
- ⁴ For the results of the surface survey see Joe Uziel, and Itzhaq Shai, "The Settlement History of Tel Burna: Results of the Surface Survey," *Tel Aviv* 37 (2010): 227–245.
- ⁵ Itzhaq Shai and Joe Uziel, "Addressing Survey Methodology in the Southern Levant: Applying Different Methods for the Survey of Tel Burna, Israel," *Israel Exploration Journal* 64 (2014): 172–190.
- ⁶ Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Einleitung*, Orbis Biblicis et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 10, (Fribourg and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995): § 218, 220–222.
- ⁷ Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog I: Von Tell Abu Farag bis 'Atlit. With Three Contributions by Baruch Brandl*, Orbis Biblicis et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 13 (Fribourg and

- Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1997), Tell el-'Ağul no. 344 for a similar writing. For a similar writing without a frame see Baruch Brandl, "Scarabs, Seals, an Amulet and a Pendant," in Sarah Beit Arieh (ed.), *Bronze and Iron Age Tombs at Tell Beit Mirsim*, Israel Antiquities Authority Reports 23 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2004), fig. 3.33.
- ⁸ Fouad S. Matouk, *Corpus du scarabée égyptien 1* (Beyrouth: Imprimerie catholique, 1971), 186 no. 426
- ⁹ Olga Tufnell, Baden-Powell, D.F.W., Bate, D.M.A., Černý, J., Dinger, D., Giles, M., Helbaek, H., Isserlin, B.S.J., Murray, M.A., Parker, B., Porada, E., Thompson, P.C., Todd, I., and Waechter, J., *Lachish IV (Tell ed Duweir): The Bronze Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pl. 38: 317. The motif revived, though in a different style and form, during the reign of Ramses II (Keel 2010: no. 856), while schematic depictions with no clear royal name are shown on scarabs from later or unknown contexts at Tell el-Far'ah (S) (Keel 2010: no. 260), Gezer (Keel 2013: Geser no. 222) and Lachish (Tufnell et al. 1958: pl. 35/36 no. 219). Keel, Tell el-Far'ah Süd nr. 1-954. In O. Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog III: Von Tell el-Far'ah Nord bis Tell el-Fir. Mit Beiträgen von Daphna Ben-Tor und Robert Wenning*, Orbis Biblicis et

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- Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 31 (Fribourg and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010), 28–427. Tufnell et al. 1958.
- ¹⁰ Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog I: Von Tell Abu Farag bis 'Atlit. With Three Contributions by Baruch Brandl*, Orbis Biblicis et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 13 (Fribourg and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1997).
- ¹¹ Tufnell et al. 1958, pl. 35/36 no. 244.
- ¹² Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog I: Von Tell Abu Farag bis 'Atlit. With Three Contributions by Baruch Brandl*, Orbis Biblicis et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 13 (Fribourg and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1997).
- ¹³ C. Clamer, "A Late Bronze Age Burial Cave near Shechem," *Qadmoniot* 14 (1981): 30–34.
- ¹⁴ Siegfried H. Horn, "Scarabs and Scarab Impressions from Shechem-III." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 32 (1973): 281–289, fig. 1 no. 65.
- ¹⁵ Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog IV: Von Tel Gamma bis Chirbet Husche. Mit Beiträgen von Baruch Brandl, Daphna Ben-Tor und Leonrado Pajarole*, Orbis Biblicis et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 33 (Fribourg and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 2013), no. 676.
- ¹⁶ Shai, I., McKinny, C., Uziel, J. 2015. "Late Bronze Age Cultic Activity in Ancient Canaan: A View from Tel Burna." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 374: 115-133. The vessels were collected in the 1970s by a local settler who lived nearby. We would like to thank Dr. Philip Stockhammer who identified the bowl. A full publication of it will appear in the upcoming Tel Burna Excavation Report.
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