



## CAN SCARABS ARGUE FOR THE ORIGIN OF THE HYKSOS?

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the most intriguing questions about the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt is the origin of the Hyksos—the foreign people who ruled over northern Egypt during this time. Their Levantine origin was conclusively demonstrated by archaeological evidence from Tell el-Dab'a, yet the evidence establishing the particular region they came from (i.e., the northern or southern Levant) is inconclusive, and the question is still the subject of debate. In view of the scarcity of textual sources from this period and the inconclusive archaeological evidence, the significance of the large number of scarabs associated with this period from both Egypt and the Levant is generally recognized. This paper presents evidence based on recent studies of scarabs of this period from both regions, and argues for the southern Levant as the place of origin of the Second Intermediate Period foreign rulers in Egypt.*

The relations between Egypt and the Levant during the Second Intermediate Period are of special interest as this period saw the rule of a dynasty (or dynasties) of Canaanite origin in Egypt. These foreign rulers are often referred to in the literature as Hyksos, the Greek term used by Flavius Josephus in the late first century CE for the Egyptian *ḥkꜣw-hꜣswt*—rulers of foreign lands.<sup>1</sup>

The long-debated origin of these rulers was recently determined by archaeological evidence from the site of Tell el-Dab'a in the eastern Delta, which established their Levantine origin and the identification of their capital at that site.<sup>2</sup> The archaeological evidence at Tell el-Dab'a attests to a gradual infiltration and settlement of Canaanites at the site beginning in the late Twelfth Dynasty (ca. 1800 BCE), and to the presence of a highly Egyptianized Canaanite Middle Bronze culture throughout the Second Intermediate Period.<sup>3</sup>

Textual sources from the Second Intermediate Period are extremely rare and our knowledge depends mainly on archaeological evidence. The important discoveries at Tell el-Dab'a offer a remarkable contribution to the historical reconstruction of the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt, especially with regard to Egyptian/Levantine relations. The material culture of the Canaanite settlers in the eastern Delta displays a distinct similarity to the material culture found in Middle Bronze Age sites in Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a south Palestinian origin was suggested for the bulk of imported Canaanite jars found at Tell el-Dab'a, based on neutron activation analysis.<sup>5</sup> However, this conclusion was recently challenged on the basis of petrographic analysis of the same Canaanite jars, which argues for a northern Levantine origin for the bulk of the material.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of the large number of scarabs associated with this period from both Egypt and the Levant is generally acknowledged due to the scarcity of textual sources from the

Second Intermediate Period and the inconclusive archaeological evidence, which do not provide a coherent historical outline.<sup>7</sup> The great popularity and wide distribution of scarabs in both regions during the first half of the second millennium BCE make them an invaluable body of contemporary source material. In addition, Second Intermediate Period royal-name scarabs constitute an exclusive source for many contemporary kings, in particular those bearing non-Egyptian names, which are identified with the Hyksos of the late sources.<sup>8</sup>

A noteworthy number of royal-name scarabs of this period were found in Middle Bronze Age sites in Palestine.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the large-scale production of scarabs in Middle Bronze Age Palestine, unparalleled in this region at any other period, is undoubtedly related to the large-scale settlement of Canaanites in the eastern Delta and their subsequent domination of northern Egypt. In view of all of the above, scarabs have been used in many studies of this period; however, due to problems associated with establishing a reliable typology of scarabs, the historical conclusions presented in these studies are inconclusive and controversial.<sup>10</sup>

Establishing a reliable typology of scarabs for the first half of the second millennium BCE is now feasible because of recent studies of ceramic assemblages of the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period, which allow us to determine the relative and absolute dates of deposits in which scarabs were found at many sites.<sup>11</sup> The evidence provided by these studies, though limited to a broad definition of periods, offers criteria to distinguish between early Middle Kingdom, late Middle Kingdom, and Second Intermediate Period archaeological deposits in Egypt and Nubia, and thereby establish a typology of excavated scarab series from these deposits. The mixed assemblages of Egyptian and Canaanite pottery at Tell el-Dab'a allow us to determine the corresponding Middle

Bronze Age phases in Palestine that yielded scarabs, and establish their absolute dates.<sup>12</sup>

The large corpus of published scarabs and sealings from late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period deposits in Egypt and Nubia, and from Middle Bronze Age deposits in Palestine was recently used in an attempt to establish a new typology of these scarabs.<sup>13</sup> The principal methodological difference between this study and previous scarab studies is its treatment of the Egyptian and Palestinian excavated series as two separate groups, as it was recently shown that most scarabs from Middle Bronze Age Palestine were produced locally.<sup>14</sup> The Egyptian and Palestinian assemblages were further divided chronologically: the Egyptian scarabs were divided into late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period series,<sup>15</sup> and the Palestinian scarabs were divided into early and late Middle Bronze Age series.<sup>16</sup> The geographical and chronological classification of this sizable scarab corpus, which previously had been dealt with as one entity, has helped establish a systematic differentiation between Egyptian and Canaanite scarabs of the first half of the second millennium BCE, and introduce a stylistic and chronological typology of each group.

The new scarab typology has important implications for issues that have long intrigued the scholarly community. Among the most crucial is the precise geographical origin of the foreign rulers who ruled over northern Egypt in the Second Intermediate Period. Before discussing this question, the four groups comprising the new typology should be presented, as they form the main body of evidence on which the historical and cultural conclusions are based.

The first group consists of Egyptian scarabs of the late Middle Kingdom. These scarabs were not well defined or studied as a separate group<sup>17</sup> for two main reasons. First is the almost complete absence of excavated scarab series from the Middle Kingdom in Egypt due to the massive plundering of such items in both ancient and modern times. The second is the incorrect dating of most Middle Kingdom archaeological deposits in the early days of archaeological research in Egypt.<sup>18</sup>

To overcome these obstacles, some studies used scarabs from Middle Bronze Age contexts in Palestine that had been dated to the Middle Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> The conclusions presented in these studies are, however, highly problematic and largely unaccepted.<sup>20</sup> It was eventually realized that the Middle Kingdom date assigned to the Palestinian deposits is incorrect and that the bulk of the scarabs from these deposits were locally made and not imported from Egypt.<sup>21</sup> The difficulties encountered in previous studies can now be surmounted in view of the recent pottery studies noted above, which allow for a more accurate dating of Middle Kingdom archaeological deposits in Egypt and the corresponding deposits in Palestine. Crucial evidence for a Middle Kingdom scarab typology is also provided by the massive use of scarabs as seals for the central administration in Egypt during this period. This administrative practice has left thousands of clay sealings that had sealed doors, containers, and documents in various administrative units in Egypt and Lower Nubia.<sup>22</sup>

The archaeological deposits associated with these sealings date mainly from the late Middle Kingdom (ca. 1850–1700 BCE), the period embracing the later kings of the Twelfth Dynasty and more than half the kings assigned to the Thirteenth Dynasty.<sup>23</sup> The large number of impressions preserved on these sealings provides ample evidence for establishing a design typology of late Middle Kingdom scarabs. The distinctive stylistic profile of these designs is also attested by a large number of unprovenanced scarabs from museum collections, which can now be securely dated to the late Middle Kingdom. These scarabs provide a solid body of source material for the typology of features—the characteristic back, head, and side types of late Middle Kingdom scarabs.<sup>24</sup>

The typology of Egyptian scarabs of the late Middle Kingdom has important historical and cultural implications:

1. The stylistic homogeneity of these scarabs supports the cultural homogeneity attested to in habitation areas and cemeteries of this period, and argues for the continuity of the Middle Kingdom well into the reign of the Thirteenth Dynasty, at least until the end of the eighteenth century BCE.<sup>25</sup>
2. The almost complete absence of Middle Kingdom scarabs in contemporary contexts in Palestine corroborates the lack of commercial and cultural contacts between the two regions during this period.<sup>26</sup>
3. The large number of Middle Kingdom scarabs found at Byblos on the Lebanese coast supports the strong commercial and cultural contacts between Egypt and Byblos during this period.<sup>27</sup>

The end of the Middle Kingdom is now generally dated to the early seventeenth century BCE.<sup>28</sup> A political change in Egypt sometime between the late eighteenth and early seventeenth century BCE is indicated at a number of sites in Egypt and Nubia, where the archaeological evidence argues for the end of the central rule from the northern capital in the Lisht-Memphis region; the administrative units along the Nile valley and the royal cults associated with Middle Kingdom pyramids come to an end.<sup>29</sup> The last Thirteenth Dynasty king leaving monuments in both Upper and Lower Egypt is Merneferre Ay, whose reign is dated to the early seventeenth century BCE; it is generally accepted that the abandonment of the northern capital occurred after his reign.<sup>30</sup> There is little doubt that this development is associated with the Canaanite takeover of the eastern Delta.

In complete contrast to the stylistic homogeneity of late Middle Kingdom scarabs, which reflects the unity and cultural homogeneity of Egypt during this period, scarabs from Second Intermediate Period contexts in Egypt and Nubia reflect the cultural diversity of a divided land. Moreover, Second Intermediate Period archaeological deposits in Egypt and Nubia that yielded scarabs are problematic for two primary rea-

sons. First, the administrative use of scarabs as seals did not continue in the Second Intermediate Period, and the excavated series of this period include almost exclusively scarabs from heavily plundered and reused cemeteries.<sup>31</sup> Second, scarabs found in Second Intermediate Period archaeological deposits also include earlier scarabs of the Middle Kingdom, Canaanite scarabs imported from Palestine, and in the case of reused tombs, scarabs of the New Kingdom.<sup>32</sup>

Considering this situation, it is often difficult to determine which scarabs were manufactured in Egypt during this period. Nevertheless, in spite of the problematic nature of the Second Intermediate Period archaeological deposits in Egypt and Nubia, the scarabs found in these deposits have important historical and cultural implications:

1. The large number of Canaanite scarabs imported into Egypt during this period indicate strong commercial and cultural contacts between Egypt and Palestine at that time.
2. The existence of a scarab workshop at Tell el-Dab'a<sup>33</sup> that most probably produced royal-name and private-name scarabs of this period, as well as a small number of design scarabs.<sup>34</sup>
3. The stylistic profile of the Egyptian scarabs of this period shows inspiration from Middle Bronze Age Canaanite scarabs made in Palestine.<sup>35</sup>
4. The close stylistic similarity of royal-name scarabs of this period to Canaanite scarabs of the late Middle Bronze Age dates these rulers to the later phase of the Second Intermediate Period and not to the early phase, as suggested by some scholars.<sup>36</sup>
5. The complete absence of Egyptian Second Intermediate Period scarabs in the northern Levant, suggests a hiatus in the commercial contacts between Egypt and this region during this period.

The Palestinian Middle Bronze Age excavated scarab series were divided in the new typology into early and late groups in view of the clear stylistic difference between the scarabs found in early and late phases of the MBIIB.<sup>37</sup> The early series consist primarily of Canaanite scarabs from local tombs assigned to the early MBIIB.<sup>38</sup> The designs occurring on these scarabs are primarily imitations of Egyptian late Middle Kingdom prototypes. Yet unlike the Egyptian scarabs, the Canaanite imitations depict many signs and symbols incorrectly, indicating their production by artists who were not always familiar with their original meaning.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note the popularity of Egyptian signs and symbols representing protection and blessing, while Middle Kingdom motifs and designs representing Egyptian beliefs that were not relevant in Canaan, such as the hippopotamus hunting or Hapy-like fecundity figures, are completely absent.<sup>40</sup>

The distinct stylistic profile of early Canaanite scarabs is easily recognized, and it is apparent that scarabs displaying the typ-

ical characteristics of this group are almost completely absent outside Palestine. The archaeological deposits that yielded these scarabs can now be securely dated based on the recent studies of ceramic assemblages noted above. These indicate that the initial production and large-scale use of scarabs in Palestine coincides with (and was probably generated by) the takeover of the eastern Delta by the Canaanite population in this region—the development that marks the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt and is now dated to the early seventeenth century BCE.<sup>41</sup> The most important historical conclusion associated with this group is the connection between the beginning of large-scale use and production of scarabs in Palestine and the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt, which argues for the Palestinian origin of the Canaanite population in the eastern Delta, and against the northern Levantine origin proposed for these settlers.<sup>42</sup>

Commercial contacts between Egypt and Palestine are first attested to in the late fourth millennium BCE.<sup>43</sup> These contacts ended in the beginning of the Old Kingdom when Egypt developed a fleet capable of sailing in the Mediterranean, allowing them access to the Lebanese coast where they developed close commercial contacts with the port city of Byblos.<sup>44</sup> The close contacts with Byblos lasted throughout the Old and Middle Kingdoms with a short break in the First Intermediate Period, yet there is no evidence for any contacts between Egypt and Palestine at that time.<sup>45</sup> Egyptian commercial contacts with Palestine were resumed only in the early Second Intermediate Period after a hiatus of about 1000 years, and the strong contacts with the northern Levant seem to have ended at this point to be resumed only in the final phase of the period or the beginning of the New Kingdom. The complete absence of Egyptian Second Intermediate Period scarabs in the northern Levant supports other archaeological evidence that argues for a hiatus in the relations between the two regions during this period.<sup>46</sup> The end of commercial contacts with the northern Levant in the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period is probably the outcome of the abandonment of the northern capital Itjtawy by the late rulers of the Thirteenth Dynasty and their retreat to Thebes, where they were no longer able to continue commercial contacts with the Syrian coast.

The initiation of commercial contacts between Egypt and Palestine following the Canaanite takeover of the eastern Delta argues in favor of a Palestinian origin for the Canaanite settlers at Tell el-Dab'a, which would be expected to initiate contacts with their place of origin. The Palestinian origin of the Canaanite settlers in the eastern Delta is also supported by the fact that scarab production is attested to during this period only at Tell el-Dab'a and Palestine but not in the northern Levant, and this is also true for scarab impressions on jar handles. The Palestinian origin of the Canaanite population in the eastern Delta is also indicated by the number of Second Intermediate Period royal-name scarabs found in Palestine and their complete absence in the northern Levant.<sup>47</sup>

The large number of scarabs from late Middle Bronze Age deposits in Palestine reflects the mass production of local Canaanite scarabs during the late phases of the Middle Bronze Age. The stylistic profile of these scarabs shows that unlike the early local groups, which imitate primarily Egyptian Middle Kingdom prototypes, the late groups display a mixture of Egyptian and Levantine motifs, the latter inspired from early second millennium BCE Syrian cylinder seals.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to the early local groups, which are almost completely absent outside Palestine, a large number of scarabs displaying characteristics of the late Palestinian series were found in the Nile valley, from the Delta in the north to Kerma in the south.<sup>49</sup> The dating of the late Middle Bronze Age deposits that yielded scarabs is based on evidence from Tell el-Dab'a, which argues that the changes in style and distribution of the late Canaanite scarabs are associated with political changes in Egypt that are most probably the outcome of the rise of the Fifteenth Dynasty—the Hyksos.<sup>50</sup>

The designs occurring on late Canaanite scarabs found in Egypt display a choice of motifs that differs from that attested to in Palestine. Regardless of the massive importation of late Canaanite scarabs into Egypt and their distribution throughout the Nile valley, particular motifs such as the toga wearer or the nude goddess are completely absent or extremely rare.<sup>51</sup> Also extremely rare are scenes inspired from the Levantine cultural sphere. On the other hand, Canaanite scarabs depicting Egyptianized mythical images like the falcon-headed human figures were popular in Egypt.<sup>52</sup> The particular motifs occurring on late Canaanite scarabs show strong Egyptian cultural influence. Nevertheless, the complete absence of motifs associated with the Egyptian funerary cult, as well as the mixture of Egyptian and Levantine motifs argue for the adaptation of Egyptian iconography and its incorporation in the Levantine cultural sphere rather than the adaptation of Egyptian religion in Canaan.

The commercial and cultural contacts between Egypt and Palestine in the Second Intermediate Period are also reflected in the founding of additional Canaanite-populated sites in the eastern Delta such as Tell el-Yehudiyeh and Tell el-Maskhuta, which display a ceramic repertoire identical to that of the Hyksos period occupation levels at Tell el-Dab'a (strata E/2–D/2). This distinctive material culture, which is found only in the eastern Delta, consists of mixed assemblages of Egyptian pottery, imported Canaanite pottery, and locally made imitations of Canaanite vessels.<sup>53</sup> Sites discovered in northern Sinai confirm commercial contacts between the eastern Delta and southern Palestine during this period.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the significant increase and rapid growth of highly organized urban settlements in Palestine was also associated with the Hyksos rule in Egypt.<sup>55</sup>

The evidence presented above indicates close commercial and cultural contacts between Egypt and Palestine during the Second Intermediate Period, while no such contacts are attested with the northern Levant during this period, arguing for the southern Levant as the place of origin of the Canaanite popula-

tion in the eastern Delta. It should be noted, however, that regardless of the Egyptian cultural influence in Palestine, which is manifested in the iconography of the Canaanite scarabs and their massive use as funerary amulets, the distinct differences in the material culture between the eastern Delta and Palestine, and the complete absence of Egyptian inscriptions in this region strongly argue against Egyptian domination of Palestine. Moreover, the scarabs dating from this period, those found in Egypt as well as those found in Palestine, argue against the “Hyksos religion” suggested by some scholars based primarily on motifs occurring on scarabs.<sup>56</sup> These motifs, however, appear only on Canaanite scarabs and not on Egyptian scarabs of this period, and most of them are found mainly in Palestine, while they are missing or extremely rare in Egypt.

It is interesting to note the special role of Tell el-'Ajjul in Egyptian-Canaanite relations during the Second Intermediate Period, which has been pointed out in a number of studies arguing for the identification of the site with Sharuhēn.<sup>57</sup> The scarabs found at Tell el-'Ajjul support this identification: First, the exceptional number of Second Intermediate Period royal-name scarabs found at the site far exceeds that of all other sites.<sup>58</sup> And second, the new scarab typology demonstrates that Tell el-'Ajjul yielded an exceptional number of Egyptian design scarabs of this period, while only isolated examples were found elsewhere in the Levant. Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence at Tell el-'Ajjul—the architecture and ceramic assemblages—reflects a typical, albeit affluent, Canaanite town that differs considerably from the typical eastern Delta cultural sphere. It can therefore be concluded that the Hyksos kingdom, which included northern Egypt as far south as Cusae,<sup>60</sup> did not extend into southern Palestine.

#### NOTES

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