

Irit Ziffer

SYMBOLS OF ROYALTY IN CANAANITE ART IN THE THIRD AND SECOND MILLENNIA B.C.E.

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We live in a literate world, dominated by texts – a world in which writings take precedence over pictures. At the dawn of civilization, however, the visual symbol took precedence over text in promoting an emergent ideology of centralized leadership. The following survey examines the symbols of royalty that appear in Canaanite art from the third and second millennia B.C.E. First, however, we must turn to the use of such symbols in the large centers of civilization that bordered on Canaan, which began developing earlier and closely influenced the symbols used in Canaanite culture.

The processes of urbanization and state-formation got underway around the mid-fourth millennium B.C.E. in Mesopotamia and Egypt, resulting by the mid-third millennium in the formation of large urban centers and city-states. The cities had large, diversified populations whose members – various

groups of craftsmen and administrative personnel, including priests – were not necessarily connected by kinship. Basic subsistence resources were not freely accessible to the entire social body but were concentrated in temple stores. In this way, for the first time in the process of social evolution, social strata were formed, defined by the degree of their access to the essential resources. The ruler stood at the peak of the hierarchical social structure, followed by subordinate administrators at various levels. This social structure gave rise to an ideology aimed at justifying the concentration of power in the hands of one individual. The dissemination of this ideology was based on symbols and rituals intended to unite the population around the institutionalized regime.

The royal ideology was promoted by means of various artifacts bearing symbols. In a non-literate

society, symbols effectively inculcated a social order dictated by the rulers, who claimed divine sanction. Among the main symbols was the human form, representing not humanity as such but its ideal agent, the hero of human activity – the king. The symbols served as visual texts, bearing messages regarding the behavior appropriate to all realms of human life: war and peace; the means of food production and consumption (the banquet, presided over by the king, presumably at court); religious ritual, and worship of the gods.

The Development of Formulaic Symbols

Several visual formulae took shape in the fourth and third millennia B.C.E. in Mesopotamia and Egypt, to be adapted later to Canaanite applications. In Mesopotamia, the

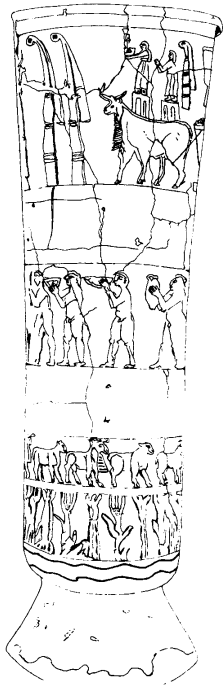
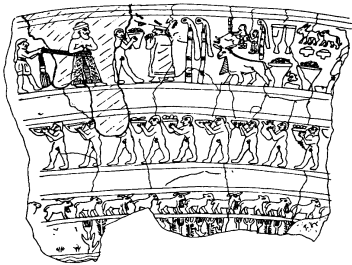


Figure 1a: Alabaster vase from Uruk: Priest-king meeting the goddess (Kuhrt 1995, figure 1a-b).

king, identifiable by his netted skirt and characteristic headgear, was represented in various contexts reflective of ideal kingship: presiding at rituals as the priest-king (Figure 1); on a military campaign, standing erect and grasping a spear, alongside a depiction of his soldiers smiting a group of bound captives, shown naked as a sign of their humiliation (Figure 2); hunting lions (Figure 3); and, in a very early representation from the first half of the fourth millennium B.C.E., subduing lions with his bare hands (Figure 4). These formulae, recurring in different versions, cemented the image of the Mesopotamian king at his various types of endeavor. They were retained through the neo-Assyrian period and were adopted by the neighboring cultures; for example, the Mesopotamian paradigm of the king subduing lions also appears on an Egyptian artifact (Figure 5). The activities at which the king is portrayed are not discrete events occurring at particular times and places. They are timeless, taking place in the eternally recurring time of religious reality. Historical art began to appear in Mesopotamia only in the neo-Assyrian period.

The image of the Egyptian king took shape at the end of Dynasty 0

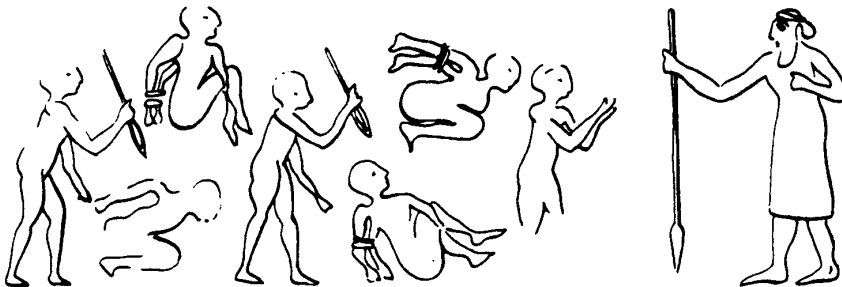


Figure 2: Seal impression from Uruk: Captives being put to death by the spear in the presence of the priest-king (Amiet 1980, figure 661).



Figure 3: Lion hunt stele: Priest-king hunting lions, late fourth millennium B.C.E. (Amiet 1980, figure 611).



Figure 4: Stamp seal from Susa: Ibex-man subduing lions (Amiet 1980, figure 119A).



Figure 5: Knife handle from Gebel el-Arak, Louvre (Cialowicz 2001, figure 20).

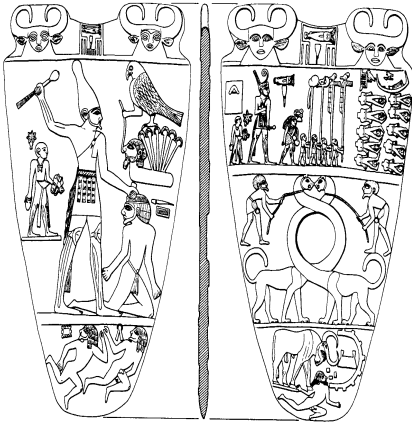


Figure 6: Slate palette of Narmer from Hierakonpolis, Cairo Museum (Cialowicz 2001, figure 29).

(about 3,000 B.C.E.), appearing on the macehead of the King Scorpion and on the commemorative slate palette of King Narmer from Hierakonpolis (Figure 6). On the obverse side of the Narmer palette, the king is depicted wearing a short kilt, an artificial tail and beard, and an oblong headdress – the white crown of Upper Egypt, the primary symbol of kingship in early periods. In one hand he brandishes a mace, while with the other he grasps the hair of a kneeling captive – the generic Asiatic captive of Egyptian art – whose name appears in hieroglyphics above the king's hand. This timeless act of subduing the enemy became the icon of Egyptian royal ideology. To the right of the captive's head appears a hawk with a human hand, which grasps a rope tied to the nose of a human figure seen to emerge from a patch of ground covered with papyrus plants. The significance of this combination of surrealistic, impossible representations of objects drawn from the known world, in

which the king becomes the hawk-bodied, human-handed god Horus carrying out a human activity, is "the great Horus subduing the dwellers of the land of papyrus." The king is identified by the appearance of his name in the upper part of the palette, between two Hathor heads, on the facade of a temple bearing hieroglyphics of a catfish and a chisel, signifying Narmer, "the cleaving catfish." On the reverse of the palette, the same combination of hieroglyphics appears before a depiction of the king, this time wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt, as he strides toward rows of decapitated enemy soldiers. Two men using ropes to subdue a pair of entwined, snake-necked feline predators (on a Mesopotamian model, Figure 7) apparently symbolize the union of Upper and Lower Egypt.



Figure 7: Cylinder seal: Snake-necked feline monsters (Amiet 1980, figure 424).

The Mesopotamian banquet scene also depicts a timeless act. The feast motif took shape in Mesopotamia in the first half of the third millennium B.C.E. On cylinder seals, on votive stone plaques that were hung in sanctuaries by means of a hole pierced at the center, and on the inlaid Standard of Ur, the depiction of the banquet is the culmination scene in a sequence of representations. On one side of the Standard of Ur, the warrior king returns from his cam-



Figure 8: Gypsum relief plaque from Khafaja, c. 2700 B.C.E.: Feast held after the conclusion of the battle (Amiet 1981, p. 101, figure 70).

paign with booty and captives; on the other, he sits down to a victory banquet with the nobles, accompanied by a singer and a musician playing a lyre or harp. Again, the banquet scene represents an aspect of royalty rather than any specific battle. On the single-faced votive plaques, the motifs of returning from battle and sitting down to the feast are compressed into an abbreviated form understandable to the audience of the time. Some plaques show a man and woman at the feast (Figure 8), with the man raising a drinking bowl in one hand and holding a plant – suggestive of a palm frond or shoot – in the other. In Mesopotamia, the date palm was the archetypal sacred tree, on account of its many uses: it provided food that could be preserved for a long time; its trunk served as building material; its leaves could be woven into baskets and mats; and its fronds were useful as brooms. In figurative terms, the palm frond or shoot (*hoṭer* in Hebrew) implied kingship.

*Means of Communication in
Palestine and the Levant*

Because of its geographical location, Palestine was subject throughout its history to the influence of the great civilizations of the ancient Near East – Mesopotamia and Egypt. Urbanization began somewhat later in Canaan than in the larger cultural centers, in the last century of the fourth millennium B.C.E. Early representations of local rulers begin appearing from the end of the fourth millennium B.C.E.

An image of the king standing erect and grasping his spear, engraved on one of the stone slabs found in Stratum XIX at Megiddo, near two of the early temples (Figure 9), most likely may be taken as



Figure 9: Incised stone slab from Megiddo: Figure carrying spear (Beck 1995, figure 5a).

a *pars pro toto* allusion to the configuration of the king going to war. In third millennium B.C.E. cylinder seal impressions on the shoulders of storage jars from northern Palestine, another aspect of the ruler is featured (Figure 10a–b): a

human form offering a plant to a seated or standing horned figure. Amnon Ben-Tor interpreted this scene as being related to the Mesopotamian representation of the king feeding the sacred herd. More recently, Pierre de Miroschedji has proposed that it represents the meeting of the king and the great goddess (the horned figure) – as on the Uruk vase

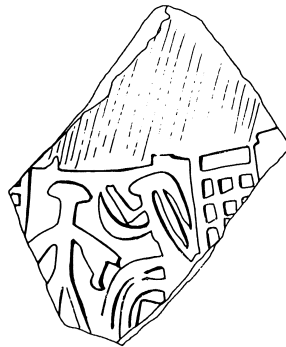


Figure 10a: Cultic scene of a person standing before an animal in human attitude, impressed on a jar shoulder from Tel Qashish (Ben-Tor 1994, figure 18b).



Figure 10b: Cylinder seal impression: The priest-king feeding the sacred herd (Amiet 1980, figure. 637B).



Figure 11: Gold dagger and sheath from Byblos (Frankfort 1969, figure 60).

(Figure 1) – prior to the sacred marriage rite. Pirhiya Beck sees it as expressing the royal ideology, which, in choosing what to convey to the public, emphasized the ritual element among the king's many functions.

The beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. saw an intensification of the relations between the Syrian coastal cities and Egypt, as Egyptian kings sent luxury goods to the kings of Byblos on the Lebanese coast. Distinct Egyptian iconographic influences can be discerned in the beautiful objects created by craftsmen in the Syrian coastal cities. Thus, a gold dagger and sheath from Byblos show two depictions of the king, in one of which (on the sheath) he rides on a donkey in the Canaanite manner (Figure 11), while the other (on the dagger handle) is borrowed from the image of an Egyptian king. In Egypt, donkeys were used as pack animals but not as mounts. On pectorals made in Byblos, the king

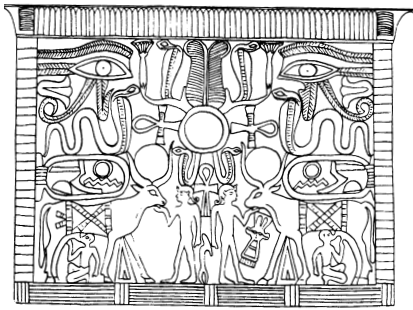


Figure 12a: Gold pectoral from Byblos: The divine cow suckling a Byblite prince.

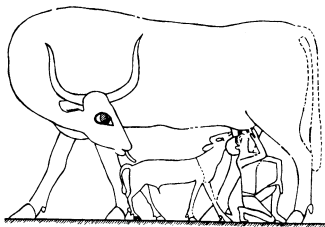


Figure 12b: Egyptian wall painting from a tomb at Beni Hasan: The divine cow suckling its calf and the young king (Keel 1980, figures 37, 39).



Figure 13a: Syrian cylinder seal: The raised smiting arm.

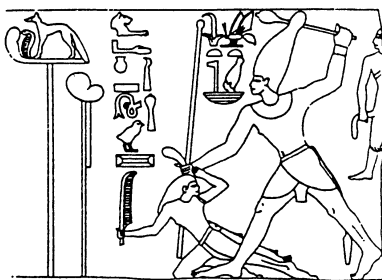


Figure 13b: Egyptian motif of the Pharaoh smiting an Asiatic foe; from Gebelein, Middle Kingdom (Teissier 1996, figure 24, 1h).

is shown suckling from a cow's udder (Figure 12a). This figure, too, draws on an Egyptian model (Figure 12b), but the content and significance are local. In Mesopotamian hymns from the third dynasty in Ur (around the twenty-first century B.C.E.), the kings portray themselves as calves suckling at the breasts of the goddess Ninsun, the "Wild Cow," who was also the mother of the hero Gilgamesh. Thus, Simo Parpola interprets the configuration in Assyrian art of the cow giving suck to her calf as a metaphor for the king and his divine mother

Around the nineteenth or eighteenth century B.C.E., the form of a man in a smiting posture, one arm brandishing a mace and the other bent, appeared in Syria-Palestine. This posture is derived from Egyptian iconography, in which the king is shown smiting his enemy while grasping his hair (Figure 13a). In Syria, however, the enemy was not shown: It was considered enough to depict the hero in a smiting stance to evoke his powerful and victorious qualities. The image of the smiting king persisted down to the Persian period in the eastern Mediterranean. Bronze figurines in this posture, with tall headgear reminiscent of the white crown of Upper Egypt, have usually been regarded as Canaanite deities based on the Egyptian prototype (Figure 13b). On Syrian and Palestinian cylinder seals and on the Baal stele from Ugarit, a figure in smiting stance, holding the weapon of the snake-plant, represents the Syrian storm god (Figure 14). Various Egyptian gods and goddesses also appear on Syrian cylinder seals. They were very likely intended to represent the many Canaanite gods known from



Figure 14: Baal stele from Ugarit (Amiet 1981, p. 156, figure 31).

texts, which lacked local iconography in art (Figure 15). The sphinx, the griffon, the winged sun disk, the headgears of Egyptian gods or rulers, and other symbols were integrated into local iconography and took on a life of their own, not necessarily related to their initial cultural meanings.

Around 1800 B.C.E., Palestine's connection with Egypt became closer, as attested by the discovery



Figure 15: Cylinder seal impression of Sumirapa, king of Tuba: Winged sun disk hovering over a Syrian prince with tall oval headdress and draped garment with thickened borders being blessed by an Egyptian-type falcon-headed god and the Syrian goddess (Keel 1989, figure 5).

in excavations at Tell el-Dab`a in the Nile Delta of storage jars whose provenance, confirmed by petrographic tests, was from southern Palestine. In the same period, scarabs begin to appear in Palestine. These are flat-bottomed, domed stamp-seals or amulets carved in the form of a dung beetle (scarabeus sacer) – a creature held sacred in ancient Egypt – with designs, figures, and/or inscriptions engraved on the flat bottom. A hole pierced through the length of the scarab allowed it to be threaded on a string or wire, so that it could be worn on a bracelet, a necklace, or a ring, or tied to a fibula used to fasten garments. In Egypt, scarabs were used for sealing documents as well as containers in which items were either traded or stored. They have been discovered in foundation deposits beneath the walls or floors of houses and also in tombs, among the funerary goods of the deceased. As Pirhiya Beck has discussed, in Palestine, too, many scarabs have been found in tombs, attesting the adoption from Egyptian practice not only of the medium – the scarab – but also of the way it was used.

Scarabs seem to have been especially popular in Palestine, so much so that they replaced the cylinder seals that were so common there in the third millennium B.C.E., though notwithstanding the large numbers of scarabs found at archaeological sites, very few actual scarab-seal impressions from Palestine are known. The scarabs bear the richest selection of the most common designs of the period in Palestine, which are of a local nature, constituting an important source for the study of Canaanite art. Othmar Keel

believes that the scarabs served an analogous function to that of the Mesopotamian cylinder seals, namely, as a common and important means of communication, directly expressive of the spirit of the period.

A group of scarabs whose distribution extends to the northern valleys of Palestine depicts the local ruler clad in a wide-bordered robe. In a scarab from Barkai, the robed figure wears a tall hat and is surrounded by Egyptian hieroglyphic



Figure 16: Canaanite scarab from Barkai: Canaanite ruler wearing the draped garment with thickened borders and the tall, oval headdress derived from the headdress of the Syrian king, surrounded by Egyptian hieroglyphics (Schroer 1985, figure 32).

characters (Figure 16), while in the other scarabs from this group he is shown with a closely fitting skullcap or a short hairdo (Figure 18a, below). The robed figure is derived from Syrian cylinder seals, where it represents the ruler (as in (Figure 15). This recurring configuration on the Palestinian scarabs most likely reflects the artists' intent to depict the local ruler in traditional Canaanite costume, while the accompanying symbols are Egyptian. These symbols already appear in Syrian glyptics of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries B.C.E. Sylvia Schroer, in the scholarly tradition of Othmar Keel, believes that this isolated motif on the scarab is drawn from the Syrian



Figure 17a: Canaanite scarab: Hathor-type nude goddess lifting her skirt (Schroer 1989, no. 8).

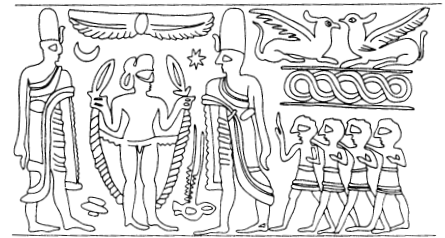


Figure 17b: Syrian cylinder seal: The nude goddess between two figures of the Syrian ruler wearing the tall, oval headdress with emulated uraeus (Teissier 1996, figure 243).

cylinder seals. Since the engraving area on the minuscule scarab was restricted, isolated components were taken from the Syrian cylinder seals and used by themselves on scarabs: the ruler; the naked goddess (Figure 17a–b); the goddess embracing the ruler (Figure 18a–b), a configuration also borrowed from Egyptian art; figures



Figure 18a: Canaanite scarab from Megiddo: The essence of the divine embrace is to transmit life (Schroer 1985, figure. 66).

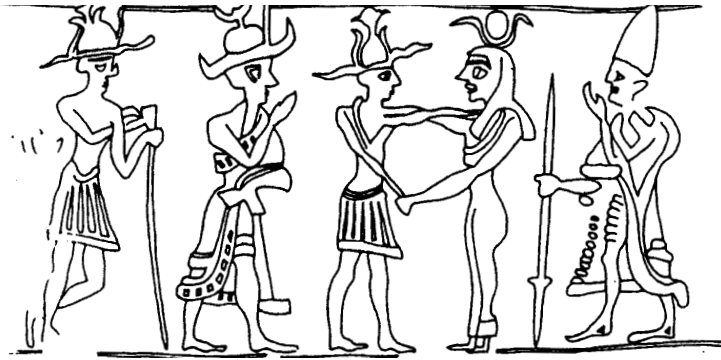


Figure 18b: Syrian cylinder seal: Pharaoh embraced by the Egyptian goddess in the presence of the Syrian ruler (Teissier 1996, figure 8).

holding flowering staffs (Figure 19a–b); etc. This deliberate extraction of individual motifs from complex scenes on the cylinder seals also transformed the motif from a marginal to a central element, imbued with new significance.

The Palestinian scarabs and cylinder seals feature Egyptian



Figure 19a: Canaanite scarab from Tell el-'Ajjul: Two Egyptianizing figures holding a plant between them.

symbols alongside the ruler. The most common is the *ankh*, the symbol of life. Others include the *nefer*, symbolizing good; the *djed* pillar, symbolizing stability; the reed, symbolizing the Nile Delta and Lower Egypt; the uraeus and the sphinx (Figures 20, 21); and the red crown of Upper Egypt. Beatrice Teissier has shown amply that these symbols, taken from the royal titles of the kings of Egypt, signified kingship in the local iconography of Canaan as well.

Canaanite Banquet Scenes

In the second half of the second millennium B.C.E., under Egyptian hegemony, mutual relations

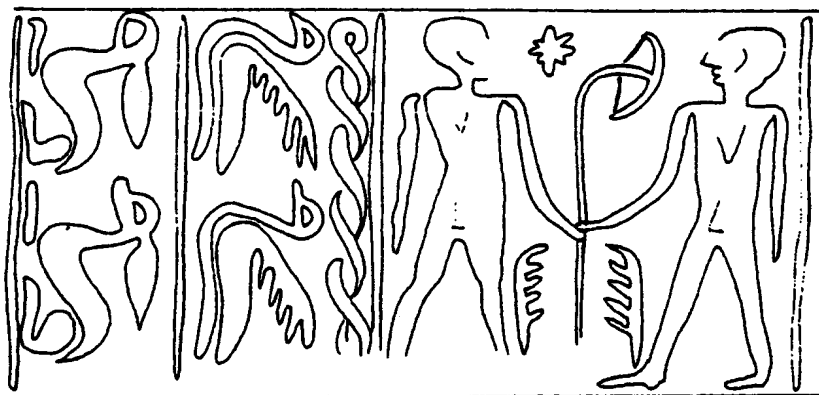


Figure 19b: Cylinder seal from Tell el-'Ajjul: Egyptianizing figures holding a plant between them (Teissier 1996, figures 20, 221).



Figure 20: Canaanite scarab from Tell el-'Ajjul: Sphinx trampling a snake (related to the solar mythology of the New Kingdom) with an ankh (Teissier 1996, figure 1v).

developed between Canaan and the neighboring cultures, including those of the Mediterranean islands. These connections find visual expression in the ivory art of Canaan. For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall focus on banquet scenes depicted on ivories from Tell el Far`ah (South) and Megiddo.

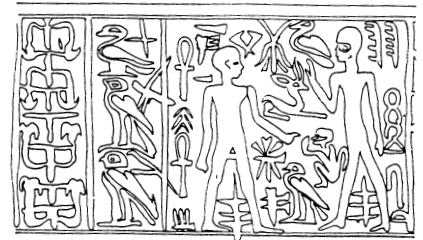


Figure 21: Cylinder seal from Tell Beit Mirsim: Egyptian symbols combined with a cuneiform inscription reading "Ibni-'Adad" (Teissier 1996, figure 226).

The ivory plaques from Tell el Far`ah (South), found in very fragmentary condition in an Egyptian-style building, have been dated on stylistic grounds to the fourteenth century B.C.E. Petrie believed that they were decorations for a chest, while Baruch Brandl has suggested that they once adorned a bedstead, like the ivories known from Ugarit. The scene, in a decidedly Egyptianizing style, portrays a

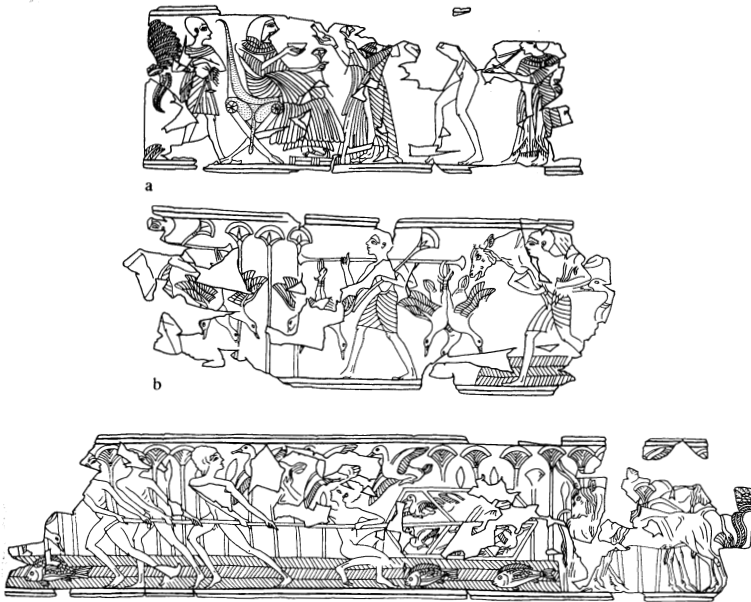


Figure 22: Ivory plaques from Tell el-Far'ah (South): Banquet scene (Barnett 1982, figure 10).

feast held upon the completion of a successful hunt (Figure 22). It depicts the ruler, clad in an Egyptian-style wig and a garment and necklace reminiscent of Egyptian dress in the time of Akhenaten, sitting on a folding chair with an upholstered back in the Egyptian style. He holds a drinking bowl in one hand while putting a long-stemmed lotus flower to his nose with the other. In a motif reminiscent of the scene from Amarna in which Nefertiti pours a drink into a chalice held by Akhenaten, a butler pours him a drink from a *situla* – a vessel entirely unknown in the ceramic repertoire of Palestine. The arcane figures, with their archaic smiles, are full of vitality and move as in a dance, recalling Aegean-style scenes of motion. The hunting scene is set in a papyrus swamp, regarded in Egypt as a place of earthly delights and also as the venue of the rebirth of the god Horus. The ruler sniffing the lotus is patterned on the Egyptian

life-infusing gesture of smelling the lotus. In these ivories from Tell el Far'ah South, Egyptian motifs are executed in a Levantine style, evincing a life and meaning independent of Egypt. These motifs were surely singled out for replication because of their symbolism of life and protection.

The banquet scene recurs in the

Megiddo ivories uncovered in Stratum VIIA, in a palace that was destroyed in the mid-twelfth century B.C.E. Four sequential plaques and an additional plaque (Figures 23 and 24) depict the return from battle and the banquet, which, as we have seen (Figure 8), constituted a characteristic Mesopotamian topos from the third millennium B.C.E. onward. Here, too, the depiction of the campaign does not relate to a specific historical event; rather, the return from battle and the presentation of captives to the victorious king had become an iconic representation of the ideal reign. In these ivories, the ruler is shown seated on a throne, holding a drinking bowl and a flower. Here and in other Levantine representations, the flower is an Egyptian lotus, which became the conventional flower in throne scenes, a motif that eventually was adopted in neo-Assyrian art.

The four sequential plaques (Figure 23) show the battle and the following events in detail, recalling the artistic treatment in the Ur Standard. In the first plaque, the (ruler's?) chariot is rendered in

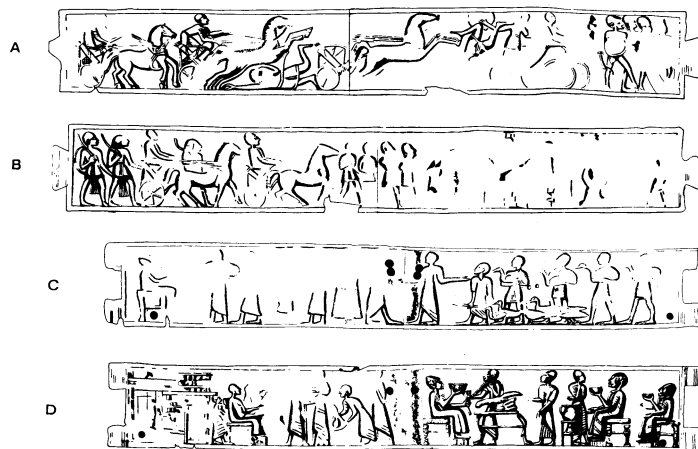


Figure 23: Ivory plaques from Megiddo: Battle and banquet scenes (Loud 1939, nos. 159–162).



Figure 24: Ivory inlay from Megiddo: Victorious homecoming and banquet scene (Loud 1939, no. 2).

sequential progression, as in a cartoon strip. His body leans further forward with the gathering speed of the galloping horses, which rise on their hind legs to trample a single enemy soldier, representing an entire army crushed beneath their hooves. Another enemy soldier falls on his head with his legs flailing. These visual means were meant to enhance the viewer's sense of the heat of battle. The second plaque depicts the triumphal parade of the returning army – the infantry and the royal chariots. In the third plaque, servants are shown bringing fatted geese for the feast. The victory banquet itself is portrayed in the fourth plaque, in two scenes focusing on the figure of the ruler. In the plaque's right portion, two pairs of revelers sit opposite the ruler. All the banqueters sit on padded stools with lathe-turned legs, resembling the Syrian chairs depicted in the eighteenth-century B.C.E. basalt sculptures from Ebla and the throne from Hazor. Before them, next to a small table, stands a servant in a characteristically nonchalant Egyptian pose. The ruler, a king or prince sitting at a table laden with food, raises a large drinking bowl in his right hand while holding a lotus flower in his left. A servant standing opposite offers the towel on his shoulder to the ruler to wipe his mouth. In the left-hand portion,

the prince sits on a throne opposite five figures, one of whom bows and offers him a jug. A young servant stands to the prince's right.

In the other plaque from Megiddo (Figure 24), the return from battle and the victory banquet are compressed into a single monument, with the direction of the sequence indicated by the ruler's profile. The two scenes are separated by a column of stylized papyrus plants. At the right, beneath a winged sun-disk undoubtedly symbolizing the deity under whose auspices the victory was achieved, is the scene of the return from battle. A single warrior equipped with a spear and shield leads the procession of two naked captives, tied with a rope to the bridle of the two horses that pull the battle chariot bearing the returning ruler, dressed in his military apparel. Behind him, a small soldier carries a sickle-shaped sword on his shoulder. At the left, the same prince, in ceremonial dress, sits on a sphinx throne with a footstool, holding a bowl and a lotus flower in his hands. A noblewoman proffers him the towel draped over her shoulder while appearing to hold the stem of the lotus in the king's hand. Behind them are depicted a mixing bowl, head-cups, and two servants. Some pigeons – replacing the ducks depicted in Egyptian scenes

– fly off, while another one pecks at the ground next to the king's throne. A female musician plays for the celebrants.

The banquet ivories from Tell el Far'ah (South) and Megiddo are the first known works of Canaanite art to define royalty by way of the symbolism of an enthroned figure holding a cup and a flower. In Akkadian and Ugaritic, and later in biblical Hebrew, the formulaic expression "throne and plant" (or staff) stands for exercising kingship. The pictorial formula relays the same message.

In its Canaanite adaptation, the lotus, like the other Egyptian symbols that were integrated into Canaanite art, is divested of its original Egyptian meaning and endowed with local significance. The sphinx throne is the counterpart of an Egyptian seat with a slanting backrest, upholstered with a rug. Unlike the Egyptian sphinxes, which are depicted in stride, the sphinx shown here is at rest, so that only two of its legs are seen, rather than four. And while the Egyptian sphinx is depicted as male, the one in Megiddo is female.

The Canaanite banquet ivories draw upon the Egyptian representational style of the fourteenth century B.C.E., as for example in the design of the horses' legs. In Palestine, then, the depiction of the return from battle, which had evolved from a Mesopotamian formula, was executed in an Egyptianizing style. In the context of the frequent warfare that prevailed in Canaan in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E., as reflected in the el-Amarna letters, the battle scene and its sequel apparently constituted an appropriate subject for the times, though the represen-

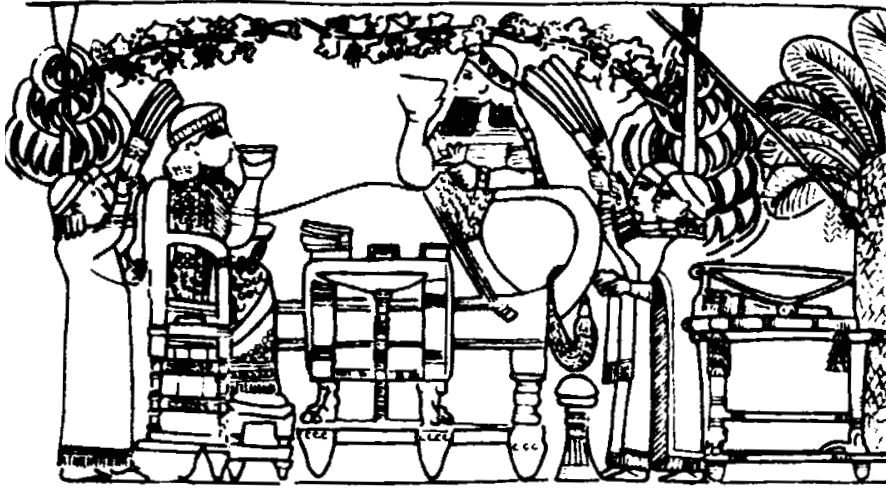


Figure 25: Ashurbanipal at his victory banquet under the grapevine, raising cup and holding lotus flower (Amiet 1981, p. 113, fig. 118).

tation did not reflect any specific battle.

The Megiddo ivories of the late second millennium B.C.E. thus epitomize the fusion in Canaan of the artistic traditions of the predominant neighboring cultures. In the first mil-

lennium, the image of the enthroned king holding a cup and a lotus flower was disseminated throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East and became an icon of kingship (Figure 25).

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