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Postal address (materials sent for reviewing purposes and other correspondence):

*Universitatea “Al. I. Cuza”, Facultatea de Istorie, Bulevardul Carol I, nr. 11, 700506 - Iași, Romania.*

Tel.: (+04) 0232 201 615; Fax.: +(4) 0232 201 201, +(4) 0232 201 156;

Website: saa.uaic.ro; Email: saa.uaic.ro@gmail.com, blucretiu@yahoo.com.

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Power and Opposition in the Ancient Near Eastern and  
Mediterranean World

edited by Mait Kõiv and Vladimir Sazonov



# Table of Contents

## Power and Opposition in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean World

Mait KÕIV, Vladimir SAZONOV, Introduction .....	7
Walter SOMMERFELD, Sumerischer Widerstand gegen semitische Herrschaft. Migration, Machtkämpfe und Demographie im 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr. ....	11
Giulia TUCCI, Religious Syncretism and Control Over the Territory: Pharaohs in Southern Levant During the Late Bronze Age .....	41
Andres NÕMMIK, Egyptian Control in the Southern Levant and the Late Bronze Age Crisis .....	55
Vladimir SHELESTIN, Old Hittite Opposition in the Religious Aspect .....	83
Vladimir SAZONOV, Mait KÕIV, Justification of the Usurpation of Power by Hittite Kings .....	93
Siim MÕTTUS, Some Observations About Succession Principles in the Hittite New Kingdom .....	109
Lynette G. MITCHELL, The Politics of Power: The Rise and Fall of the Deinomenid Dynasty in Fifth-century Sicily .	123
Luca MACALE, «Like an unseen god» (Ctesias F1b §21, 7 Lenfant): The Unapproachability of the Near Eastern Kings in Greek Sources as Tool of Power .....	143

Priit-Hendrik KALDMA, The Tyranny of the Peisistratidai in Athens: Expenses, Revenues and the Opposition to the Sole Rule .....	157
Mait KÕIV, Monarchy in the Iron Age Levant and Archaic Greece: the Rulers of Corinth in a Comparative Context .....	179
Eleni TZOVLA, Compliance and Endurance. The Athenian Power Building through the Melian Dialogue .....	233
Salvatore TUFANO, Show Trials and The Opposition to Pelopidas and Epameinondas .....	245

## Religious Syncretism and Control Over the Territory: Pharaohs in Southern Levant During the Late Bronze Age

Giulia TUCCI\*

**Abstract.** *Egyptian domination on the territories of Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age brought the conquerors to maintain close contacts with the local population. Among other techniques of domination, the Pharaohs made massive use of political and religious propaganda. The identification of some divinities of the Egyptian and Palestinian Pantheons enabled both populations to share the same places of worship, which promoted contact with local communities and made integration and life together possible. This cultural entanglement operation had both ideological and functional goals. Palestinian shrines and temples became multifunctional centers well integrated into the socio-cultural context, used as the centers for the collection of taxes imposed by the Egyptian rulers.*

**Rezumat.** *Dominația Egiptului asupra teritoriilor din sudul Levantului pe parcursul Epocii Târzii a Bronzului i-a adus pe cuceritori în situația de a menține contacte strânse cu populațiile locale. Printre alte metode de menținere a dominației, faraonii au utilizat la scară largă propaganda politică și religioasă. Sincretismul unor divinități din panteonul egiptean cu cele palestinene le-a permis ambelor populații să împartă aceleași lăcașuri de cult, ceea ce a încurajat contactul cu autohtonii și au făcut posibile integrarea și conviețuirea. Realizarea unei îmbinări culturale a servit atât unor scopuri ideologice, cât și altora mai pragmatice. Altarele și templele palestinene au devenit centre multifuncționale bine integrate în contextul socio-cultural al vremii, fiind folosite inclusiv ca locuri de colectare a taxelor impuse de către suveranii Egiptului.*

**Keywords:** Pharaohs, Southern Levant, Late Bronze Age, Religious Syncretism.

### INTRODUCTION

During nearly three centuries, from the end of 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Southern Levant (Fig. 1) was subjected to the direct rule of Egypt. This long domination, imposed by a country whose ideological prestige was totally proportionate to demographic, economic and military ones, had indeed a decisive influence on various aspects of life in the region.<sup>1</sup>

During the Late Bronze Age the supervision of the territory was achieved through the creation of functional areas: limited areas under direct Egyptian control, territories of

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\* Tel Aviv University

<sup>1</sup> LIVERANI 2004, 14, for an update overview on political and economic history of the Levant I suggest PFOH 2016.

economic and productive interests as coastal plains and harbours; small local polities linked to Pharaohs by an oath of allegiance and through taxation/tributes collected once a year by the Egyptian army, and border areas where Pharaohs operated just in case of rebellions.<sup>2</sup> Asiatic territories were organized into three provinces: Canaan had its capital at Gaza; Syria, the ancient province of Amurru, had the capital at Simyra/Tell Kazel; Lebanon, ancient Upe, had the capital at Kumidi/Kamid el-Loz.

The Southern Levantine region during the Late Bronze Age was perfectly integrated into the international framework of the period, as the el-Amarna correspondence can testify. Moreover, the material culture of the region, rich in importations and imitations, reflects the phenomena of hybridization and cultural entanglement, once known as “International Style”.<sup>3</sup>

The commercial and political role of Southern Levant in this era was surely supported by the Egyptian presence within the territory, one of the crucial features characterizing the history of Canaan during the Late Bronze Age.<sup>4</sup> Egyptian New Kingdom left a variety of traces of its presence on the Levantine sites, visible in the architecture, customs and above all the material culture.<sup>5</sup>

#### EGYPTIAN INFLUENCE ON SOUTHERN LEVANT AND PROPAGANDA

Egyptian military and administrative presence in Southern Levant is clearly visible from the fortresses and residencies discovered along the main route of the region. We have numerous examples, such as the buildings along the *Via Maris*, Horus Way, or along the inner King’s Highway.<sup>6</sup> Inside these buildings<sup>7</sup> the findings of Egyptian-style pottery along with Egyptian objects for daily-use witness the roughly permanent presence of Egyptian personnel, living in close contact and cooperation with local communities.

The archaeological remains of the Egyptian presence dating predominantly to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasties pertain to architecture, inscriptions, pottery, personal ornaments and faience items. Significantly, in Southern Levant there are also traces of Egyptian funerary customs and administrative practices.<sup>8</sup> The Egyptian-style material culture grew during the Ramesside period, witnessing to both the increase of the Egyptian control over the territory and to the local emulation of the Egyptian customs by the

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<sup>2</sup> TUCCI 2016a, 89.

<sup>3</sup> KANTOR 1997; CAUBET 1998.

<sup>4</sup> PANITZ-COHEN 2014, 541.

<sup>5</sup> TUCCI 2016b, 63.

<sup>6</sup> AHARONI 1979, 48 and 54; DORSEY 1991, 57; GARDINER 1920, 99; OREN 1982-83, 20-24; 1987.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Tell el-‘Ajjul, Jaffa stratum VI late, Beth Shean strata XIB and R-1b.

<sup>8</sup> BEN-TOR 2016, 67.



local government group. This second aspect is highlighted by the use of amulets, scarabs<sup>9</sup> and personal ornament, both imported and locally imitated.

This Egyptian influence is also reflected in the most important places of worship in Palestinian cities. Shrines and temples of the Late Bronze Age were multifunctional centers well integrated into the socio-cultural context. In addition to more traditional “functions” they became centers for the collection of taxes imposed by Egyptian rulers upon the conquered cities. These tributes came in the form of food offerings (and luxury commodities) which were then stored in the sanctuaries themselves. However, the possibility should not be underestimated that some kind of religious syncretism or contamination was promoted by the foreign rulers introducing elements of the Pharaonic religion into the local cult tradition in order to obtain a better acceptance of the foreign power by the local populations.<sup>10</sup>

How much did the Egyptian conquerors use the infiltration into the local habits to increase their own role in the country and to profit from the local goodwill?

In the southern part of the region it is possible to assume some sort of Egyptian influence on the local religious institutions, which became an important aspect of the imperialist/colonialist policy.<sup>11</sup> While the Egyptian royal sources are filled with references to the power, especially military power, exercised by the Egyptians over the territory, the archaeological record provides us with the evidence for the emergence of a new segment of population: an elite participating in the negotiation and collaboration integrating a part of Egyptian culture into daily life.<sup>12</sup> It must be remembered that the studies on the colonization processes recognize the importance of the worship of local elites in developing and strengthening the Egyptian hegemony in the region.<sup>13</sup>

#### LEVANTINE CULT PLACES AND EGYPTIAN PRESENCE

The cult places found in Southern Levant are of different type, size and content, reflecting both the variety of deities worshipped and the diverse groups of worshippers.<sup>14</sup> Despite the number of structures discovered in the region we know little about the ritual and the

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<sup>9</sup> For a hint of the propaganda motifs (Pharaoh striking enemies) on scarabs found in the southern Levant see Tucci in press, *The appeal of subjugation: artistic evidences for propaganda action of the Pharaoh in the Southern Levant*.

<sup>10</sup> SALA and TUCCI 2019, 48.

<sup>11</sup> NAKHAI 2005, 122.

<sup>12</sup> KOCH 2021, 43

<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it is still under debate if the techniques of control included a conspicuous movement of personnel from Egypt or the use of local personnel (STREIT 2019, 68). The discourse can be summarize in the “direct rule” model vs “elite emulation” (WEINSTEIN 1981 and HIGGINBOTHAM 2000). The issue is partly solved by I. KOCH 2021.

<sup>14</sup> GONEN 1992, 222.

function of the temples and sanctuaries, due to the absence of religious local texts and to scanty findings.<sup>15</sup>

In Syria, cultic places of the Late Bronze Age show both elements of continuity with the Middle Bronze Age architectural traditions and innovative elements of Mittanic provenance, creating a clear-cut differentiation between the inner and coastal Syria and the Euphrates middle valley region.<sup>16</sup> References to the Egyptian architecture are almost absent, also in the regions under the control of the New Kingdom. As far as sacral architecture in Lebanon is concerned, there are relatively few examples available to date, provided mainly by the discoveries within the buildings. The plans of these buildings seem to be typologically similar to the religious buildings in the north of the region.

In Southern Levant (Israel, Palestine and Jordan) the major cultic areas of the Middle Bronze Age remain in use, the symmetrical *miḡdōl* stay standing in Canaanite centers such as Megiddo, Hazor and Shechem. Next to these traditional Syrian-derived plans, a local type emerged – a non-monumental structure with a long room and bent-axis access.<sup>17</sup> The most common architectural typology is that of the broad room temple which in some cases, as we shall see, was during the Late Bronze Age IIB combined with Egyptian influences, giving rise to the buildings of particular development.<sup>18</sup>

The sanctuaries of Beth Shean (VIII-VI),<sup>19</sup> and Lachish Summit (or Acropolis) Temple (Level VI) and Fosse Temple,<sup>20</sup> fall into the sphere of strong Egyptian influence and control.<sup>21</sup> During the Late Bronze Age IIB and Iron Age IA these cult places exhibit a raised Holy of Holies approached by a staircase and a tripartite plan resembling private chapels at Amarna.<sup>22</sup> Despite the apparent Egyptian character of the features their local nature is no longer in doubt.

The city of Beth Shean is mentioned in Egyptian Execration Texts since the Middle Kingdom; during the New Kingdom it was mentioned in the List of Cities of Thutmose III, in

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<sup>15</sup> Usually for the Levant cult we refer to the preserved texts which are the Syrian ones from Ebla, Ugarit, Mari or Emar. This has little sense from the perspective of analyzing a South Levantine cult that did not necessarily have to follow the developments in the northern and northeastern part of the region (KEEL and UEHLINGER 1998, 11). A recent analysis on the subject is proposed by Matthew Sunsnow (SUNSNOW 2021), with the specific focus on the Middle and Late Bronze Canaan.

<sup>16</sup> MATTHIAE 1997, 114.

<sup>17</sup> MAZAR 1992, 177.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Beth Shean and Lachish. MAZAR 1990, 252 and 1992, 173.

<sup>19</sup> For Beth Shean temples see ROWE 1940, JAMES and MCGOVERN 1993, MAZAR 2011 and MULLINS 2012.

<sup>20</sup> For Lachish Acropolis/Summit Temple see USSISHKIN 2004, for Fosse Temple see mainly TUFNELL et al. 1940.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed analysis of the sanctuaries see the recent article (that takes its main cues from this paper) SALA and TUCCI 2019.

<sup>22</sup> HIGGINBOTHAM 2000, 294.

the topographical list of Seti I at Qurnah and in the one of Rameses II, as well as in the Papyrus Anastasi I.<sup>23</sup> Beth Shean appears just once in the el-Amarna correspondence (EA 289).<sup>24</sup> The transition from an Egyptian outpost to Egyptian administrative garrison-town took place from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, with a renovation in the urbanization of the site<sup>25</sup> and the refurbishment of the sanctuary corresponding, as mentioned, to the Egyptian architectural characteristics. The stelae and some cultic paraphernalia inside the temple<sup>26</sup> indicate that at least part of the Egyptian population resided at the site – probably employed as scribes, not only administrative staff but also soldiers – prayed here and performed rituals, in which probably Egyptian personnel was involved among the priests.

The identification of the deities worshipped inside this cult building is still problematic, although the veneration of the god Mekal and female deities such as Anat or Astarte are testified by the discovery of some private stelae from this period (**Fig. 2**). It is likely that these gods were assimilated with Egyptian deities through mechanisms of religious syncretism and cultural assimilation.<sup>27</sup>

Lachish does not appear widely in Egyptian sources, but it is still mentioned in the Papyrus Hermitage 1116A<sup>28</sup> and in two el-Amarna letters (EA 287 and 288).<sup>29</sup> The Egyptian presence is especially visible from the LB II. As in Beth Shean, we see an architectural renewal in the areas of worship, which points towards a specific imitation of Egyptian tradition.<sup>30</sup> The Fosse Temple became, after a first phase adhering to local traditions, a part of the plan of renewal during the reign of Amenhotep III.<sup>31</sup> We can see a strong syncretism between a local female deity probably worshipped here (Elat) and the Egyptian deity Hathor, which was later associated with the cult of Tiye, wife of Amenhotep III, to strengthen the Egyptian legitimacy in the territory.<sup>32</sup>

When the city of Lachish reached greater development, corresponding to the Egyptian models,<sup>33</sup> a new building was erected on the top of the tell (Level VI) – the so-called Summit

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<sup>23</sup> MAZAR 2011, 157-159.

<sup>24</sup> MORAN 1992, 322.

<sup>25</sup> It is possible that the city's road plan has been rearranged so as to be more orthogonal recalling the planimetric developments of Egyptian cities as in Tell el-'Ajjul.

<sup>26</sup> Particular reference is made to stelae and offering tables with models of bread. JAMES 1966, fig. 105: 9-10,12.

<sup>27</sup> MULLINS 2012, 153.

<sup>28</sup> KOCH 2018, 26.

<sup>29</sup> PRITCHARD 1969, 488-489.

<sup>30</sup> See SALA and TUCCI 2019 and for the “elite emulation model” see HIGGINBOTHAM 2000, 134.

<sup>31</sup> Sala and TUCCI 2019, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Koch 2017, 70.

<sup>33</sup> USSISHKIN 2004, 224, 231-242, 245-246, 257-258, 261-266; WIMMER 1980, 1072; This temple (Level VI) falls into the category indicated by Higginbotham as “Temple with raised Holy of Holies. HIGGINBOTHAM 2000, 294 and 301.

Temple or Acropolis Temple. The Egyptian influence here is visible in the architectonic features and in some finds recovered inside, but the deities worshipped were almost certainly local. If in the previous cases (Beth Shean and Lachish Fosse Temple) we have seen the mechanism of syncretism between local and Egyptian cults, probably to bring the local population closer to foreign rulers and vice-versa, in the Summit Temple we witness a second phase of "exploitation" of places of worship promoting the Egyptian interests. A bowl and some bowl fragments with hieratic inscriptions were discovered on the site, probably originating from Level VI<sup>34</sup> and dated to the Ramesside period (Ramesses II or III). The almost entire bowl bears three inscriptions dating to the Ramesside period (Merneptah or beginning of Ramses IV). The texts are grain accounts, and the term *šmw* is clearly connected to the "harvest tax".<sup>35</sup> During the renewed excavations at Lachish four other sherds with inscriptions have been found, and the fragmentary texts suggest the presence of Egyptian scribes in the city as part of the administrative system, probably responsible for issues relating to taxation.<sup>36</sup>

The concentration of these votive objects with clear functional evidence in the main place of worship of the city, in the period of greatest Egyptian presence, suggests that Lachish was an important center for the collection of annual tribute in wheat. The exploitation of a place of worship (therefore a public building) as a collection center seems a natural solution. We should not forget the strong agricultural capacity of the hinterland of Lachish and the central position of the city in respect of a number of smaller settlements.

The same type of bowls with hieratic inscription as in Lachish were found in the site of Tel Sera' (Fig. 3).<sup>37</sup> This was a seat of an Egyptian fortress (13<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), perhaps the residence of a governor. On the badly preserved bowl no.1 it is possible to read the same term *šmw*, in this time luckily in association with year 22 of the reign of Rameses III.<sup>38</sup> On another bowl recovered on the site it is possible to read of goods/taxes/taxation (?) arriving at a house/estate or temple.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting that the Late Bronze Age levels in Tel Sera' have revealed a temple with a local asymmetrical plan, situated near the already mentioned Egyptian residence/fortress.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Fragments found during the renewed excavation of the city do not come from a precise stratigraphic context. GILULA 1976 and GOLDWASSER 1991.

<sup>35</sup> TUFNELL 1958, 123-133, pl. 44 and 47.

<sup>36</sup> GOLDWASSER 1991, 252.

<sup>37</sup> To the list provided here should now, as update, be added the findings from Tel Haror, Ashkelon, Qubur el-Walalydah and Tell es-Safi. All the inscribed cups are dated between the 14th and 12th centuries BC. I refer to the article by K. STREIT 2019, 77-79 for a full analysis.

<sup>38</sup> GOLDWASSER 1984, 77.

<sup>39</sup> GOLDWASSER 1984, 80 and HIGGINBOTHAM 2000, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Pending publication of the final volume on the excavations of the site, see READE et al. 2017, 11.

In the site of Tell el-Far'ah South, probably the location of an estate presided by the Egyptians, two sherds were attributed to the same bowl. As in the previous case, the text, extremely fragmentary, seems to indicate a connection between barley brought or owed to the overseer and recorded by a certain scribe.<sup>41</sup>

The site of Deir el-Balah, a southern outpost of the Egyptian governors, has revealed a fragment of a bowl inscribed with the same kind of texts in which it is possible to read once again the term *šmw*, and the translation speaks again about the harvest tax to be delivered.<sup>42</sup>

The sites mentioned here testify to the coexistence of and interaction between Canaanites and Egyptians. They belong to the centres where the influence of Egyptian domination is greater, and demonstrate that the cultural interaction had both ideological and functional aims, as some LB temples where evidence for both Egyptian and local worship has been found were used to collect taxes. Private stelae found inside these temples, usually found in cultic and funerary contexts and probably representing Egyptian personnel living in the Southern Levantine sites, could convey the wish of these people to affirm their origin and maintain their own traditions.<sup>43</sup>

Another characteristic pertaining to cult and religion shared by these sites could be mentioned here (although it goes beyond the subject of this paper).<sup>44</sup> This concerns (among other funeral practices) the use of clay anthropoid sarcophagi for burying a few selected individuals (**Fig. 4**). Until recently it was thought that these were the burials of Philistines, based on some attributes depicted on the lids comparable to the Egyptian reliefs. However, the results of the analyses of the sarcophagi themselves have proposed dates prior to the arrival of the Philistines in the Southern Levant. The rich funerary furnishing that usually accompany the burials, and the central position of the sarcophagi in respect of the burials in simple pits in these cemeteries, can suggest that the sarcophagi belonged to the members of

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<sup>41</sup> GOLDWASSER and WIMMER 1999, 39.

<sup>42</sup> WIMMER 2010, 225.

<sup>43</sup> TUCCI 2016a, 88. The number of complete or fragmentary Egyptian style stelae it is not large. Five were found in Beth Shean and five in the cemetery of Deir el-Balah, one came from Tell Chinneret/Tell el-'Oreime (ALBRIGHT and ROWE 1928, 281), others came from the east bank of the Jordan river (SMITH 1901, 347-349; GIVEON 1965; WIMMER 2002; WARD and MARTIN 1964, pl. 3; BIENKOWSKY 1992, pl. 34).

<sup>44</sup> The author is preparing an article on the anthropoid sarcophagi in the Levant. The sites in the entire region that yielded anthropoid clay coffins (or fragments), dating between 14th and 11th centuries BC, are Tel Shaddud, Deir el-Balah, Tel Midrash, Tabakat Fahel (Pella), Tell el-Far'ah South and Lachish. VAN DEN BRINK et al. 2017, 126. Recently published, it is possible to add the discovery of sarcophagi at Tell el-Borg see M. Jansen [https://www.academia.edu/38853479/Clay\\_Coffins\\_from\\_Tell\\_el-Borg\\_Tell\\_el\\_Borg\\_Preliminary\\_informaTion?email\\_work\\_card=view-paper](https://www.academia.edu/38853479/Clay_Coffins_from_Tell_el-Borg_Tell_el_Borg_Preliminary_informaTion?email_work_card=view-paper).

the governmental elite of the sites who, for reasons not yet entirely clear, wanted to underline their links (by belonging or by emulation?) to the Egyptian culture.<sup>45</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The persistence of the Egyptian domination on the territories of Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age brought the conquerors to maintain close contacts with the local population. Strong ideological beliefs and the Egyptian charisma had indeed influenced and shaped to its favor various aspects of the life in the region.

One of the techniques used by Pharaohs in Egypt, in order to gain acceptance and respect from their subjects, was the massive use of political and religious propaganda. The ingenious intuition for the Levant was to identify a comparable theological plan for some divinities of the Egyptian and Palestinian Pantheons, so that both populations could share the same places of worship, thus trying to gain a closer contact with local communities by making integration and life together possible.

This sort of steered cultural entanglement operation had clearly not only ideological goals, but also functional ones. Palestinian shrines and temples during the Late Bronze Age became multifunctional centers well integrated into the socio-cultural context, and in addition to more traditional functions become centers for the collection of taxes imposed by the Egyptian rulers. These tributes came in the form of food offerings or precious items, which were then stored in the sanctuaries themselves.

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<sup>45</sup> As seen until now, the deceased buried inside these anthropoid sarcophagi must not have been purely of Egyptian origin. It is likely that the Egyptians present on the site, once finished their assignment abroad, returned home where they found a worthy burial after the death.

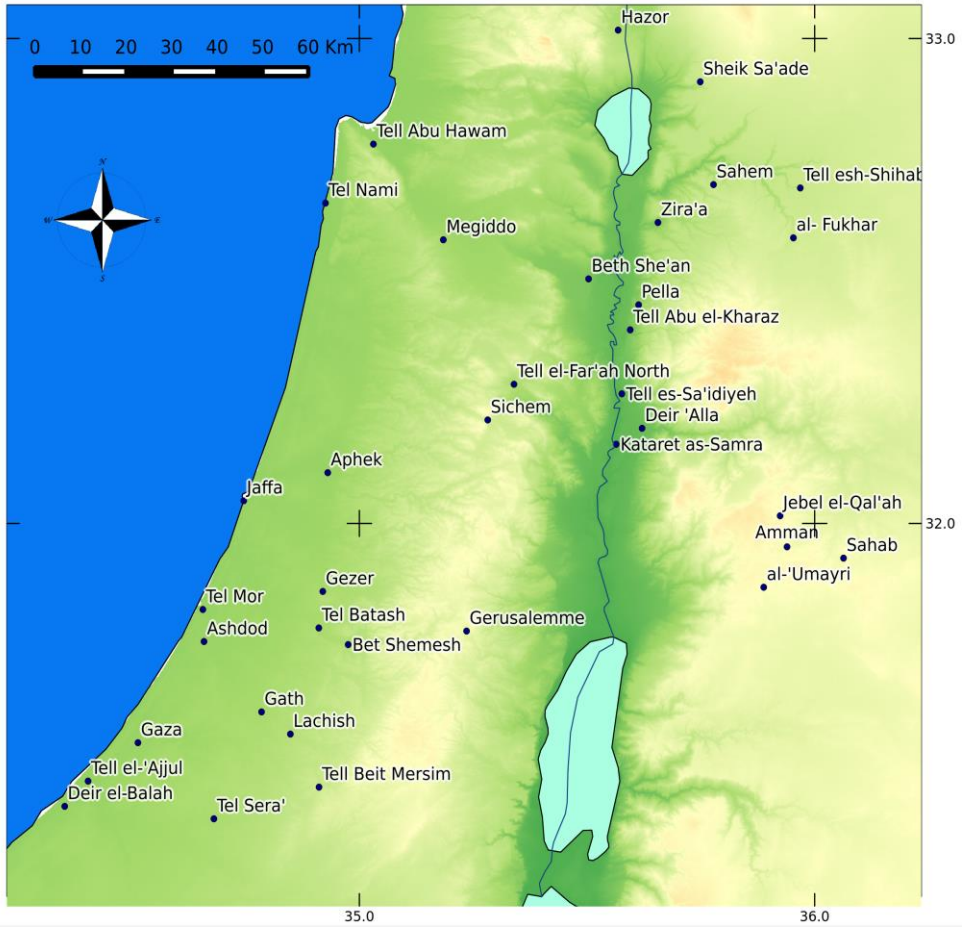


Fig. 1 Southern Levant and cities mentioned in the text.







**Fig. 4** Anthropoid sarcophagi from Deir el-Balah. Israel Museum, Jerusalem (after Ben-Tor 2016).

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## CAPTIONS

**Fig. 1** Southern Levant and cities mentioned in the text. (Thanks to Dr. Alessandro di Ludovico).

**Fig 2** Private stela dedicated to the goddess Antit (after Schroer 2011: Kat. 881 and Mullins 2012: fig. 18).

**Fig. 3** Bowl with hieratic inscription from Tel Sera', IAA 2015-1105 (after Ben-Tor 2016, 90).

**Fig. 4** Anthropoid sarcophagi from Deir el-Balah. Israel Museum, Jerusalem (after Ben-Tor 2016).



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