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Prosperity and Decline in LBA Canaan: A Reply to Liebowitz and Knapp

Two recent articles in the *Bulletin* highlight the problem of defining the character of the Late Bronze Age in Canaan. Knapp (1987) restates the view that Late Bronze Canaan was impoverished and in the throes of cultural collapse (essentially the view of the previous generation of scholars: Albright 1960: 101; de Vaux 1978: 120; Kenyon 1979: 199–200). Liebowitz (1987) argues that the Late Bronze Age was not a period of cultural decline, but rather a highpoint in terms of material culture. In a sense, both are correct. The purpose of this note is to present a third option: that the marginal areas of Canaan declined in the Late Bronze Age, while key strategic areas flourished. The crucial factor is the nature of the Egyptian colonial presence.¹

Liebowitz (1987) bases his argument on the evidence of Palestinian LB II ivories, which indicate a high level of artistic achievement. He correlates the ivories with “achievements” in stone sculpture, terracottas, and painted pottery. Unfortunately, Liebowitz has ignored the geographical and social context of the ivories and other “luxury” objects. The majority of the pieces he enumerates come from three sites: Megiddo, Tell el-Far^cah (S) and Beth-shan—sites that were certainly under Egyptian control. De Vaux long ago pointed out that it was precisely in the richer towns that have yielded precious objects and “works of art” that evidence exists of Egyptian occupation (de Vaux 1978: 122). Most of the ivory work at Megiddo and Tell el-Far^cah (S), moreover, comes from the “palaces” (i.e., the Megiddo VIIA “treasury” and the Tell el-Far^cah Residency; cf. Oren 1984: 47–48). Neither the contexts within the towns nor the towns themselves can be regarded as indicative of the quality of life in Canaan as a whole.

Knapp, on the other hand, largely ignores the localized evidence of wealth. Both archaeological evidence and textual sources suggest that substantial recession in the areas away from direct Egyptian authority—for instance, most of the hill regions (Bienkowski 1987)—co-existed with a certain amount of prosperity in the larger centers, where Egyptians were based. Architecture and pottery at Jericho, Hazor, and Tell Deir ^cAlla show a gradual degeneration, compared to Beth-shan, Lachish, and Tell el-^cAjjul, which had more luxury, buildings of greater architectural pretension, and rather better pottery (Kenyon 1979: 201; Bienkowski 1986: 151–52).² In the Amarna Letters, the disruptions of the ^capiru are alluded to mainly with reference to the hill country, away from the areas of direct Egyptian influence (Aharoni 1979: 176). The ^capiru seem to have had little effect on the areas under Egyptian control. There was apparently little disruption of trade and communication, vital for effective imperial control (Sever 1972: 131). I have argued elsewhere (Bienkowski 1987) that Hazor may have been outside the arc of effective Egyptian control by the Amarna period.³ It was perhaps a natural focus for Egypt’s opponents, such as the ^capiru, with whom the king of Hazor reportedly had some dealings (EA 148: 41–43).

The nature and aims of the Egyptian presence in Canaan are in my opinion the key to understanding the Late Bronze Age (Bienkowski 1986: 139–46). From the time of Tuthmosis III, Egyptian authority was imposed mainly on the densely populated areas. Examination of the names of captured towns and districts indicates that Egyptian influence was weaker in most of the hill regions and Transjordan (Aharoni 1979: 151; Weinstein 1981: 14). It is likely that the situation

at the time of Tuthmosis III was much the same as in the Amarna period, from which there is much more detailed information. The Amarna Letters are often portrayed as documenting the breakdown of the Egyptian administration in Palestine because they record the intrigues of the Palestinian princes. Most of the letters, however, contain routine and standardized responses and expressions of loyalty. They indicate that the Egyptian presence in Palestine was stable and that the situation was normal (as Knapp notes, 1987: 25–26; Seveler 1972: 132; Liverani 1979: 6–7).⁴ By the time of the Amarna period, Egypt and Mitanni were more or less at peace, so military expeditions were no longer needed. It was the 19th Dynasty pharaohs who had problems with rebellions in Palestine. The Egyptian presence was apparently increased in the 13th century B.C., probably to crack down on more frequent unrest (Weinstein 1981: 14–18). Several new Egyptian fortresses and strongholds were established in the 14th and especially the 13th centuries B.C. on the vital routes of northern Sinai—Deir el-Balah, Tell el-Far^cah (S), Tell el-^cAjjul, Tell Jemmeh, Tell Mor, Aphek, and Beth-shan (Gonen 1984: 69; Oren 1984: 53).

Tuthmosis III's original motivations to control Palestine were to extend the boundaries of Egypt and to have direct links with Syria, which was of more commercial interest than Palestine. The feuds with Mitanni and later with the Hittites were over control of Syria, so occupation of Palestine was a strategic necessity. It is clear that Egypt was not interested in the economic exploitation of Palestine. The regular annual tribute first imposed by Tuthmosis III was used to supply the Egyptian army and administration in Palestine; usually it was not sent to Egypt (except for the three cities dedicated by Tuthmosis III to the temple of Amun in Karnak, which had to send grain annually, while in the reign of Rameses III various Egyptian temples received grain from Palestine [Ahituv 1978: 96–97; Helck 1962: 260–62]). I do not accept Knapp's statement that the pharaoh's administrative aim was to extract the maximum possible tribute (Knapp 1987: 25). Egypt did not need to import cereals, and the grain collected as tribute was kept in royal granaries in the Egyptian bases in Palestine.

Comparison with texts from Ugarit suggests that the sorts of things that the king of Ugarit

controlled—specifically trade—were just those in which the Egyptians were involved in Palestine (Bienkowski 1987: 149–50). That implies that the Egyptians, through their vassal rulers, in practice controlled the trade of the Palestinian towns or at least benefited from it through tribute. That would explain why the wealth in Palestine was more-or-less confined to the centers of Egyptian administration and power.

Tubb (1988) has noted that the final Late Bronze and early Iron I sites that have produced evidence for bronze production were controlled or dominated by the Egyptians or Philistines. He tentatively suggests that the Egyptians were deliberately safeguarding a key industry, perhaps employing groups of Sea Peoples as metalworkers. If that was so, one can see the Egyptian hold not so much in terms of an economic benefit to Egypt itself, but as the 19th Dynasty tightening its grip on the economic base of Canaan and controlling its trade. Nevertheless, the evidence is hardly conclusive. For example, the only piece published from the major Egyptian stronghold of Beth-shan (Level VI) is a pottery crucible with fragments of copper or bronze (Fitzgerald 1930: pl. 44: 12). The absence of such pieces at other sites may be no more than an accident of discovery.

The Egyptian presence in Palestine and the exaction of tribute to supply the Egyptian army and administration started with Tuthmosis III and lasted about 250 years. If tribute were required each year, we can expect that eventually the Palestinian towns would feel the effect, particularly since apparently there were fewer and poorer people living in fewer and smaller settlements than in the Middle Bronze Age, perhaps as a result of the destructions at the end of that period (Gonen 1984; Bienkowski 1986: 151). Although the amounts of tribute requested appear small in absolute terms, comparison with the tribute paid by the north Mesopotamian and north Syrian states to the Hittites and Assyrians shows that the burden of taxation was fairly heavy (Na^caman 1981: 181–84). The Egyptians were siphoning off the benefits from exploitation of natural resources and trade, and little or no profit was being fed back into the Palestinian economy (cf. Knapp 1987: 25). The effects seem to have been felt hardest in the areas not under direct Egyptian occupation, which nevertheless were nominally part of the empire. The unrest in

LB IIB with which Seti I and Rameses II had to deal may have been caused by economic hardship, but in fact it made things even worse. The resulting increase in the Egyptian presence no doubt meant a corresponding increase in tribute to meet the needs of an expanded colonial army. The Palestinian towns would have had to bear the extra cost, and their economies, already weak, would have found the burden crippling. The increase in the numbers of *ʿapiru* can be explained by those economic difficulties (Liverani 1979: 17–18).

My hypothesis is that the diversion of resources to pay for the upkeep of the Egyptian colonial administration and that administration's control of trade were the main causes of the decline of certain areas of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age. One aspect of that decline was the rise in the number of refugees, which further contributed to the degenerating situation by producing more marauding bands that raided settlements. The overall decline of the economy, not surprisingly, was felt particularly in places where Egyptians were not living and which therefore were not receiving substantial benefit from agricultural surpluses and trade profits. They were essentially the less densely populated areas of Palestine and Transjordan, especially the hill regions. Though not under direct Egyptian control, many towns in those areas are mentioned in the lists of Tuthmosis III and the 19th Dynasty pharaohs; apparently they were theoretically under Egyptian administration and within reach of an Egyptian army. The localized economic decline was reflected in the gradual degeneration of the material culture and in the generally low quality, quantity, and extent of settlements.

The nature and pattern of Egyptian presence/control in individual areas needs to be investigated

closely. It is clear that in some areas Egyptian control fluctuated, and actual Egyptian presence could be short-lived. Some areas were under the control of a permanent "governor" (*rabiṣu*), while others are mentioned only as being visited by an "envoy" (*mār šipri*) (Bienkowski 1987: 57). Understanding the practical differences between the two situations is crucial. For example, Singer (1983: 20) equates the Egyptian titles "Royal messenger to every foreign land" with being a static "governor" in one place or region, as would be a *šakin-māti* or a *rabiṣu*. However, the true Egyptian equivalent is *imy-r h3swt (mḥtt)* or "Governor of (N) foreign lands" (Kitchen 1969: 81; Singer adheres to Edel 1953: 56). "Royal messenger to every foreign land" is the exact counterpart of the peripatetic *mār šipris* of the Amarna Letters; they were personal envoys of kings (Bienkowski 1987: 55–57; Valloggia 1976) and traveled abroad in the pharaoh's service.⁵ Thus, in the Amarna Letters, mention of an official linked with a Canaanite town need not imply that he was permanently stationed there, or even that the Egyptians controlled it.

Textual evidence, of course, needs to be assessed together with archaeological data, since some sites not mentioned in the texts apparently show evidence of Egyptian occupation. The situation toward the end of the Late Bronze Age was extremely complex; and as more work is done, especially at sites in Transjordan such as Pella and Tell es-Sa^cidiyeh, our perspective is bound to change.

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NOTES

¹I have dealt with this argument in detail (Bienkowski 1986: 136–55; 1987).

²There is growing evidence of abandonment of the use of the fast potter's wheel within the Late Bronze Age. That is certainly the case at Jericho, Tell Deir ^cAlla, and the Baq^cah Valley (Bienkowski 1986: 110; Franken, in Homès-Fredericq and Franken 1985: 146–49; McGovern 1986). In the Baq^cah, McGovern (1986) has noted that LB II pottery was handmade, as were a

few LB II pots at Jericho (Bienkowski 1986: 111). It is common practice to regard the fast potter's wheel as the apogee of craftsmanship and a move away from it as a decline. There is no *a priori* reason this should be so. In the Baq^cah the handmade pottery soon became technically very proficient. I am unaware of any experiments on the cost effectiveness of different methods of pottery manufacture in ancient Palestine (though see Schiffer and Skibo 1987, and the comment by Rosen in Schiffer

and Skibo 1987: 613, on the study of technological change and performance characteristics of ceramics).

³Note the following Egyptian faience objects omitted from the list of Aegyptiaca at Hazor in Bienkowski 1987: 52; Yadin *et al.* 1961: pls. 157:39-41, 335:1-3; 227:14, 335:4. I am grateful to E. J. Peltenburg for pointing out those lacunae.

⁴The "endless conflict" of the Amarna Letters described by Knapp (1987: 26) was probably little more than petty squabbling. Note Knapp's reference to a destruction level at LB II Jericho, which does not exist (Bienkowski 1986: 112-25).

⁵I thank K. A. Kitchen for discussing this point with me.

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Response: LB IIB Ivories and the Material Culture of the Late Bronze Age

In response to my article (Liebowitz 1987: 3-24), in which I argued that the increase of ivories from Palestinian sites during LB II demonstrates that the period reflected a cultural high point rather than a period of decline, Bienkowski asserts that my observations did not take into account the social and political context of the objects. He notes that almost all the ivories I mentioned came from palaces and from cities under Egyptian control and that, therefore, the increase in ivories tells us little about conditions in Palestine in general. He argues that one cannot speak either of a cultural high point (Liebowitz 1987) or of a cultural decline (Knapp 1987) for the country as a whole, but that the sites under Egyptian domination survived, while those not under Egyptian rule declined.

While his idea is logical, attractive, and of heuristic value, I must point out several problems with it. It is neither startling nor unanticipated that many objects such as finely-worked and sophisticated ivories come from the homes of the ruling class. My point is that when one compares the best to be found in LB I with the best to be found in LB II there is no question that the luxury items of LB II are far more sophisticated than those of LB I. Similarly, when comparing the nature of Egyptian art in the various periods, the comparison is justifiably made between Pharaonic art and the art of the nobles of one period with that of another period. Thus, his point that I failed to take into account the "social conditions" is irrelevant.

Second, there is an inconsistency in his argument. On the one hand he asserts that palace assemblages tell us little about the period in

general, and on the other hand he argues—apparently on the basis of material from the homes of the ruling class—that the material culture of sites under Egyptian domination prospered and manifested a higher degree of material culture than those not under Egyptian domination.

Moreover, I think that Bienkowski's conclusions about the disparity between the level of material culture (aside from luxury items) in the homes of the upper class and those of the masses are premature. To my knowledge, there has not been a systematic comparative study of themes and assemblages of material culture of the ruling class vis-à-vis the homes and material culture of the simple folk. Moreover, concerning the Egyptian connection, the objects of material culture from a small site such as Tel Yin^cam, which apparently was not under Egyptian domination in the 13th century B.C., show a high degree of sophistication. Ruth Amiran, who examined the pottery from Tel Yin^cam, thought that the assemblage was of higher quality than that of Megiddo. Likewise, objects such as the finely-worked basalt querns, millstones, and bowls, and the unique objects such as the Egyptian blue bowl and the oversized Mycenaean stirrup jar from Tel Yin^cam reflect a high degree of sophistication. A similar degree of sophistication is found at other sites not necessarily under Egyptian hegemony. The great site of Hazor and the smaller site of Tel Sippor both yielded locally-made stone sculptures, and the repertoire of finely-painted LB II pottery from all of the LB II sites (both those under and those free of Egyptian domination) is of high quality. Thus, Bienkowski's conclusions, based on deVaux, "that it was precisely in the richer towns