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Anthropoid 'Philistine' sarcophagi: concluding remarks?

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Abstract. The care taken to preserve the bodily integrity of the deceased within an anthropoid sarcophagus is a particular funerary tradition, characteristic of ancient Egypt, but also documented by a number of findings in the Near Eastern area that testify to episodes of a phenomenon of emulation. In the area of Palestine and Transjordan, the discovery of so-called 'Philistine' anthropoid sarcophagi dated to a period between the end of the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age II (13th-8th centuries BC) has been documented; the presence of these terracotta specimens can be interpreted as the adoption of a foreign tradition by a group of individuals characterized by authority and economic availability and testifies to a receptive (i.e., passive) emulation relationship. This examination of the documentation has revealed historical patterns and dynamics that testify to the prolonged presence in an upper class (by authority and/or economic availability) of a strong cultural and ideological attraction (and openness) of the Levant to Egyptian culture, traceable over a long period of time.

Keywords: anthropoid terracotta sarcophagi, multiple burials within the coffin, open-hearth firing, Sea-Peoples, *Dorsal decubitus.*

The care for the preservation of the bodies of the dead led in some Near Eastern contexts to the creation of protective containers intended for burial, including so-called 'anthropoid' sarcophagi: this definition which is commonly used in studies took hold following its use by scholar Ernest Renan (1864: 412) on the basis of a term used in a passage from Herodotus' Histories (II, 86.7: ἐνθεῦτεν δὲ παραδεξάμενοί μιν οἱ προσήκοντες ποιεῦνται ξύλινον τύπον ἀνθρωποειδέα, ...; they, when the dead body is brought to them, show to the bearers wooden models of corpses, made exactly like by paintings...).[1]

[1] *The Histories of Herodotus*, transl. by Henry Cary, 1904, New York, D. Appleton and Company: 113-114.

'PHILISTINE' SARCOPHAGI

The unexpected discovery of anthropoid terracotta sarcophagi in the Palestinian region has led, following a rich debate in the scientific community, to a widely shared interpretation that tends to identify them as the result of an exogenous funerary custom, foreign to local customs, and therefore also to consider them as a sign of an influence of Egyptian culture on neighbouring regions.

The presence of these sarcophagi has been archaeologically documented in the Palestinian and Transjordan area, and their wide distribution can be reconstructed through fragmentary documentation (Fig. 1: for the area of present-day Israel from Beth She'an,[2] Tell Midrash,[3] Lachish,[4] Deir el-Balaḥ,[5] Tell el-Far'a[6] and Tel Shaddud (van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 106-111), and for the area of present-day Jordan from Tabakat Fahel/Pella,[7] Amman,[8] Sahab,[9] Dhiban[10] and through their dispersion in the collectors' market. [11]

These large ceramic artefacts present a particular cylindrical cocoon-like conformation of a cylindrical shape with differentiated ends (Fig. 2): they generally display a flat base on one side and a rounded opposite end with a cut-out portion, functional as a closing operculum, which is enriched with a modelled or applied (and in some cases painted) decoration.

In the initial phase of the discoveries, scholars often focused on the shape of the specimens, emphasising the variety of the decoration of the closing slabs. The 'lids' of the sarcophagi were in fact sometimes made with a simple modelling of the clay or with the application of elements (Oren 1973: 133-134) that draw a face or bust characterised in a naturalistic manner on the slab (Fig. 2: centre and right; Fig. 3) or depicted with morphologically unnatural features, conventionally defined as 'grotesque'[12] in cases where all available space on the lid is utilised, giving the image an almost caricatural appearance (Fig. 2: left).

On the basis of these considerations, the specimens have been divided into two groups (Oren 1973: 133-139): the first type (naturalistic) includes sarcophagi in which the design of the head and shoulders of a figure is clearly indicated in a manner reminiscent of the Egyptian sarcophagus tradition (Fig. 2: centre); the second type (grotesque) consists of specimens with a cylindrical shape in which the head and shoulders of the figure are not outlined on the container (Fig. 2: left).[13]

Some details of the relief decoration on the lid, e.g. the presence of a massive wig-like hairstyle around the face, of lotus blossoms and/or flowers (Fig. 3: left), or arms crossed over the chest (Fig. 2: centre and right; Fig. 3: right), lead back to a characteristic Egyptian iconography, albeit in a summary and schematic manner.

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[2] Rowe 1927: 38-41; Perrot 1946: 288-289; Oren 1973: 101-150; Dothan 1982: 268-276; Bunimovitz 1990: 216-217; Higginbotham 2000: 91, 123, 130; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 197-200; Mazar 2011: 171, 177; Panitz-Cohen 2013: 115-116.

[3] Tzori 1953: 4-5; Oren 1973: 140; Dothan 1979: 101; Dothan 1982: 252, pl. 15; Higginbotham 2000: 243; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 200.

[4] Hennequin 1939: 965-974; Tufnell 1958: 36, 131-132, 248-249; Dothan 1982: 276-279; Higginbotham 2000: 122; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 200.

[5] Dothan 1972; Dothan 1973; Dothan 1975; Dothan 1979; Dothan 1982: 252-260; Higginbotham 2000: 97, 131; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 200-203.

[6] Petrie 1930: 6-9; Dothan 1982: 260-268; Higginbotham 2000: 100; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 203-205.

[7] Yassine 1975: 62; Weippert 1988: 366, 373; Galal, Aston 2001/02: 174.

[8] Pritchard 1968: 108; Dothan 1973: 138; Oren 1973: 140; Yassine 1975: 57-68; Dothan 1982: footnote 2, 252; Mantovani 1992: 119.

[9] Albright 1932; Hennequin 1939: 965, 972; Dothan 1973: 138; Oren 1973: 140; Yassine 1975: 58-59; Dothan 1982: footnote 2, 252.

[10] Reed 1957/58: 57-67; Dothan 1973: 138; Oren 1973: 140; Yassine 1975: 59; Dothan 1982: footnote 2, 252.

[11] About the Moshe Dayan Collection exhibited in the Israel Museum of Jerusalem see Ornan 1986: 120-123; Arie 2016: 97.

[12] The unnatural character of some decorations is already defined as 'grotesque' in Fisher 1923: 234; the distinction between the naturalistic/grotesque character of the depiction is organically expressed in a classification in Oren 1973: 135-139.

[13] E. D. Oren's two types (Oren 1973: 133-139) correspond to T. Dothan's groups A and B (Dothan 1982: 254-255). Although this typological distinction is essentially shared by scholars, it is interesting to note that Lisa Kuchman/Sabbahy, analysing Egyptian production, has pointed out that there are also technical differences in the execution of faces between the two groups, Kuchman 1977/78: 15.

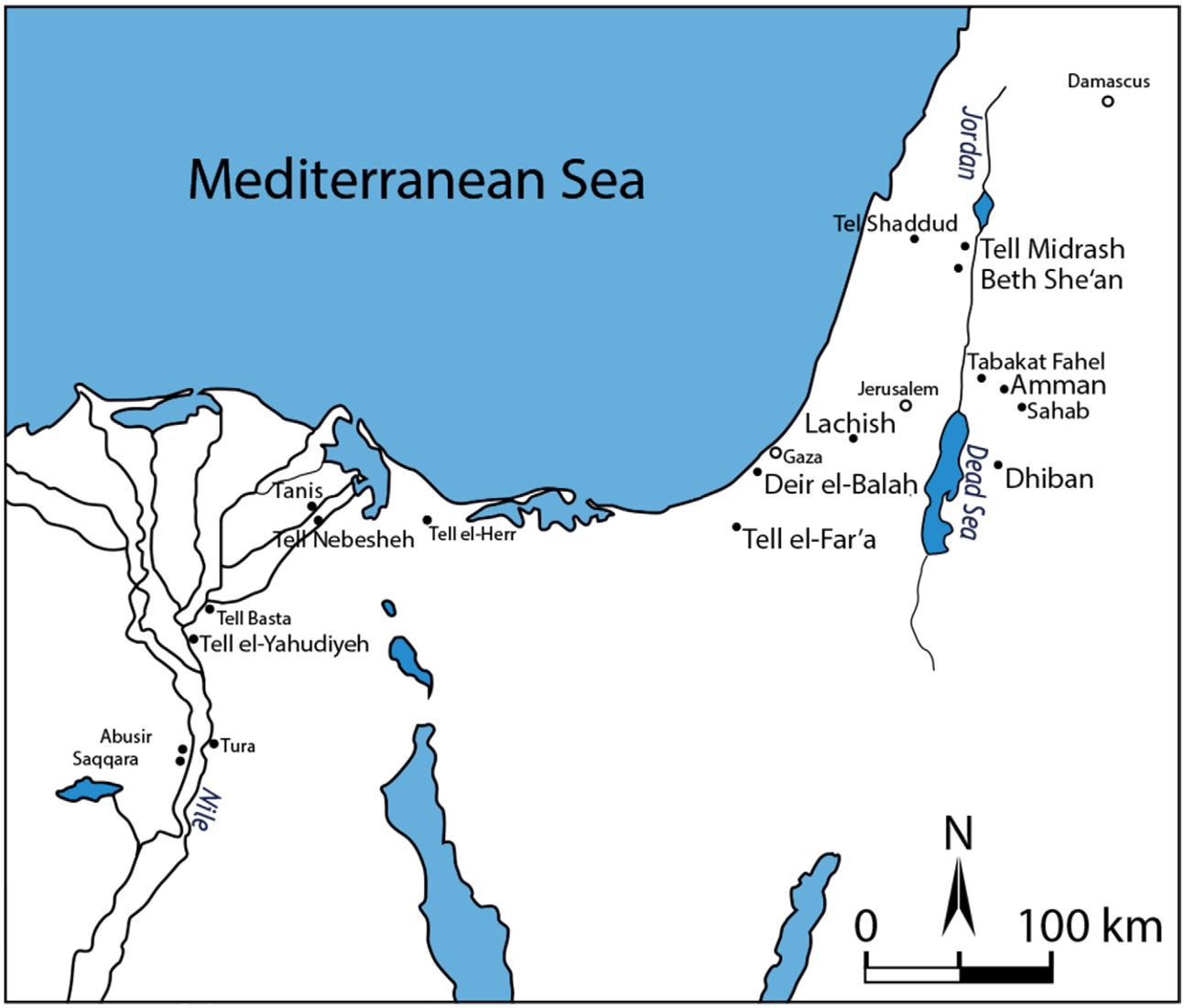

Fig. 1. Plan of the Egyptian Delta and southern Levant with mentioned sites.

Although the total number of preserved specimens is large,[14] only a very small percentage of them come from regular excavations: intact archaeological contexts are reduced to the cases of the burials found at Deir el-Balaḥ (Dothan 1979; Arie 2016: 97) and the one at Tel Shaddud (van den Brink *et al*. 2017).

The contexts of Deir el-Balaḥ, with artefacts of local production or traceable to the Philistine culture (Dothan 1982: 94-218), provided clues to the close contacts that existed between the Palestinian area and neighbouring cultures, in particular Egyptian (Dothan 1979: 5-91; Waldbaum 1966: 332). However, this limited number of sarcophagi from regular excavations does not allow certainty based on the materials found in the (four) intact burials. Recent in-depth studies of the materials generically found in the necropolises of this phase have revealed not only the presence of instances of the use of clay sarcophagi but also a widespread presence of artefacts that indicate

[14] Recent estimates put the total number of anthropoid sarcophagi from Palestine at around 130 specimens, Arie 2016: 97.

Fig. 2. Sarcophagi from Beth She'an (left: from the Tomb 66a, Israel Museum P 1433-1434; drawing based on Oren 1973: catalogue fig. 53: 4 integrated with details from photos of Richter 2002: pl. 95: a) and Deir el-Balaḥ (centre: from Tomb 114, drawing based on Dothan 1979: fig. 8; right: from the Tomb 116, drawing based on Dothan 1979: fig. 70).

a strong Egyptian emulative component (at Tell el-Far'a and other centres in the southern Levant), although the reading of the material data has not allowed the scholars to arrive at unambiguous interpretations.[15]

[15] Braunstein 2011: 17, 28-29; for the presence in the southern Levant of Egyptian and Egyptizing products associated with Egypt's policy towards the area and the chronological sequence of events in relation to the archaeological stratigraphy, see Martin 2004: 280;

Fig. 3. Sarcophagi from Deir el-Balaḥ (left: from the Tomb 118, Israel Museum ASOG 03003-03006; drawing based on Dothan 1979: figs. 122-123) and Tel Shaddud (right: drawing based on van den Brink *et al*. 2017: figs. 10-11).

On the other hand, the findings from the Transjordan area have documented the presence of morphological variants of the sarcophagi that are chronologically different from the findings from the Palestinian area. In detail from Sahab comes a lid (Fig. 5: left) decorated with a grotesque face with applied handles used as decorative elements of the face (Fig. 5: left) (Albright 1932; Hennequin 1939: 965, 972; Yassine 1975: 58-59). From Amman, come 'cocoon-like' specimens with a cylindrical shape characterised by numerous handles arranged in rows; in addition to the face, the decoration also features a relief depiction of arms stretched out along the sides (Fig. 4: left; (Yassine 1975: 58-59, figs. 2-4, pl. 21) (Fig. 4: left) or the lid is rounded and without the anthropomorphic design (Fig. 4: right; (Yassine 1975: 59, figs. 5-6, pls. 22-24) (Fig. 4: right). Finally, from Dhiban comes a specimen of an unusual type consisting of an oval-shaped case with a flat base and a long, slightly convex lid, equipped with side large bar-handles and decorated with an appliqué of a face with stylised features (Fig. 5: right), (Reed 1957/58: 57-67; Yassine 1975: 59, fig. 7).

Martin, Ben-Dov 2007: 200-201; Martin 2009: 216; Finkelstein *et al*. 2017: 277.

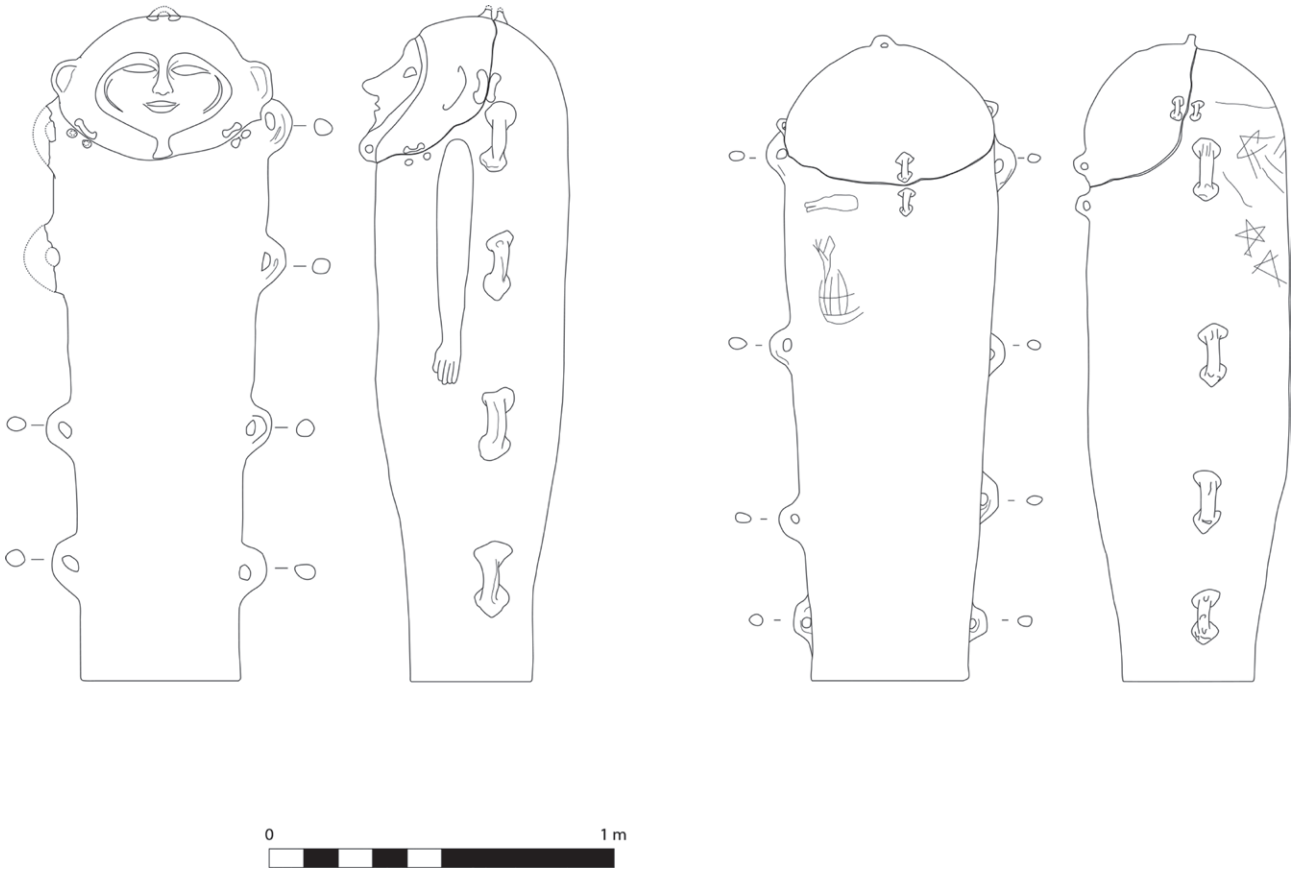

Fig. 4. Sarcophagi from *Raghdan Royal Palace* Tomb in Amman (left: inv. n. 174, front and side view drawings based on Yassine 1975: fig. 2; right: inv. no 175, front and side view drawings based on Yassine 1975: fig. 5).

Some technical aspects

Some unusual technical details recognisable on anthropoid sarcophagi were quickly pointed out by scholars, including traces of red paint (with yellow and black strokes) or a white surface plastering on some specimens (Oren 1973: 133; Dothan 1979: 99). Other technical peculiarities, however, are peculiar and widespread, such as the fragility and poor quality of the ceramic firing, which have long been the focus of scientific debate: the sarcophagi are reported to have been made using the coil technique (Dothan 1982: 254; van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 109), but the nature of the ceramic of the Palestinian specimens, rich in inclusions, porous and crumbly, has been attributed to a low-temperature firing.[16]

These minor details have contributed to the widely accepted hypothesis that the sarcophagi were made locally, a short distance from the burial site,[17] due to the objective difficulties of handling fragile artefacts of such dimen-

[16] Dothan 1979: 99; Ornan 1986: 120; Galal, Aston 2001/02: 127-128; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 35; Gunneweg 2014: 9-10. In the second half of the 20th century, the greater compactness of the ceramic lids compared to the great fragility of the containers was interpreted as an indication of a possible separate or double firing of the lid (Dothan 1979: 99; Ornan 1986: 120); in recent studies this possibility is no longer considered sufficiently justified and has raised some doubts about the firing method which have led to new reconstructions of the manufacturing process (Gunneweg 2014: 6; van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 109-110, figs. 16-17).

[17] Oren 1973: 133; Perlman, Asaro and Dothan 1973: 148-149; Dothan 1979: 99; Namdar *et al*. 2017: 726.

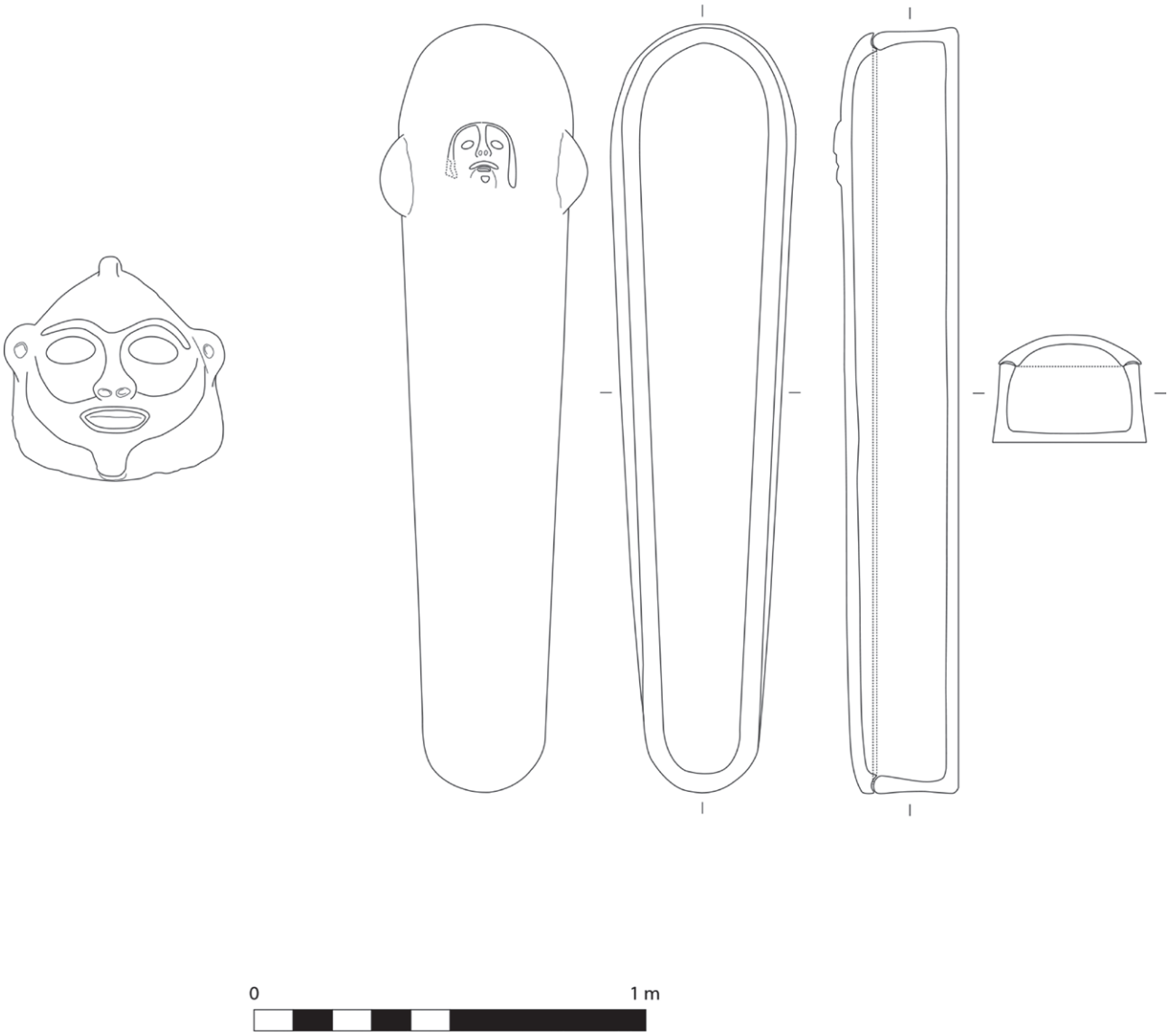

Fig. 5. Sarcophagi from Sahab (left: drawing based on Yassine 1975: fig. 4) and from the Tomb J3 of Dhiban (right: above and side views with and without cover and longitudinal cross-section drawings based on Yassine 1975: fig. 7).

sions, despite the fact that the variant specimens from the Transjordan area[18] have bar or multiple handles intended precisely for the purpose of enabling them to be (closed,) moved and transported (Galal, Aston 2001/02: 176, Cotelle-Michel 2004: 33-34).

Some aspects that are less debated by scholars concern two unusual features, namely the finding within some sarcophagi of part of the grave goods (Dothan 1982: 254; Pouls Wegner 2015: 306) and multiple burials (within the coffin: not to be confused with multiple burials in the same chamber or burial pit) reported in the Deir el-Balaḥ (Arensburg, Smith 1979; Dothan 1979: 5-T114, 46-T118) and Amman finds (Yassine 1975: 58, 60; Yassine 1983: 31) These peculiar data have been hastily interpreted as the outcome of a local funerary custom (Dothan

[18] The Transjordan specimens belong to a variant with multiple handles and are dated to the Iron Age at a later stage than the Palestinian specimens.

1982: 254; van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 127), although the small number of intact contexts that can be analysed does not allow this interpretation to be stated with certainty.

The presence of small objects inside the sarcophagus is also known in Egypt, where, however, the documented clay sarcophagi are always strictly intended for a single deceased person (Cotelle-Michel 2004: 63); moreover, in the case of Palestinian and Jordanian burials, there is no indication of possible mummification of the body.

The very detail of the multiple depositions could instead be an indication of a 'familiar' reuse of these containers within the Palestinian and Jordanian hypogea; in studies of Egyptian coffins, the function of the sarcophagus as a home for the deceased and its transformation into an expensive product have been highlighted, and the phenomenon of the reuse of the coffins and its complex social and funerary implications have also been addressed,[19] although the isolated attestations of the phenomenon in the southern coastal and inland Levant do not allow a generalisation regarding these cases, which so far remain singular and anomalous.

The presence of holes

Another interesting technical detail concerns the presence of holes of different sizes drilled before firing the artefact and located at the ends or at the rear/back of the container.

In Egypt, the presence of holes on anthropoid clay sarcophagi was reported as early as the beginning of the 20th century; in various studies, the holes were recognised as having a functional origin, varying from a practical drainage effect, in that they would allow the evacuation of the decomposition products of the deceased,[20] and it was thought that they could facilitate the drying process of the body (Junker 1912: 22); in the specific case of the larger openings at the top and base of the sarcophagi, it has also been suggested that they constituted symbolic way out left open as an escape route for the soul.[21]

Holes in the bottom of clay sarcophagi have also been documented in Syria (on non-anthropomorphic specimens): for example, they are recurring in a type of medium-sized 'quadrangular case' sarcophagus with a separate flat slab lid; on the flattened bottom of some of them, parallel rows of small holes have been reported, probably intended for the evacuation of body fluids.[22] Recent studies dedicated to Palestinian clay sarcophagi only briefly mention this subject (Cotelle-Michel 2004: 30-32), although a different hypothesis has been formulated that assigns the holes to a function of ventilation and/or venting of heat during the firing of the artefacts (Galal, Aston 2001/02: 127; Gunneweg 2014: 6).

The firing

The considerable size of these ceramic artefacts has been emphasised by scholars in order to hypothesise the use of a very large firing chamber for their production, capable of housing such voluminous products, although this observation has not led to uniformity among scholars: in the Palestinian area, the presence of kilns intended for the production of sarcophagi at the site has been hypothesised only at Deir el-Balaḥ (Dothan 1979: 99) and Beth She'an (Weippert 1988: 371) on the basis of the presence of fragments of specimens and/or manufacturing waste.

F. Cotelle-Michel (2004: 34-35), on the other hand, approached the subject for the Egyptian region along a broad chronological horizon, analysing the effects of 'open hearth' firing in the archaic tradition and attributing the execution of the chronologically more recent Egyptian specimens to firing in large furnaces of complex structure.

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[19] Cooney 2007; Cooney 2008; Cooney 2011; Cooney 2015.

[20] Scharff 1929: 5; Rowe 1930: 39; Oren 1973: 133; Dothan 1982: 254; Ornan 1986: 121; the problem of gas evacuation from sealed containers is raised in Aufrère 1987: 22.

[21] Rowe 1930: 39; Dothan 1982: 254; for the Egyptian specimens G. Steindorff spoke of *Seelenloch* in Steckeweh, Steindorff 1936: 61; Steindorff 1937: 72.

[22] For the Syrian area, see Jean-Marie 1999: 109, pls. 77, 249, 256; Felli 2015: 103-104, fig. 43; for the interpretation of the Egyptian data see Cotelle-Michel 2004: 30-31, figs. 15-16.

The presence of applications of clay in the form of small, rounded lumps near the cut between the lid and the container led the scholar to hypothesise that these clay knobs, placed at the edges of the convex slab of the lid, served to secure it to the cylindrical body of the sarcophagus during firing, thus preventing its possible deformation. [23]

It is precisely this process of 'open hearth' pottery production, traditional in the Egyptian area, that has therefore been re-proposed more recently by some scholars as also being used in the Palestinian region, although differing views remain as to the details, e.g. whether the lid should be separated from the rest of the sarcophagus during the firing phase (Gunneweg 2014: 6-10; van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 111).

The recent discovery of a sarcophagus at Tel Shaddud provided an opportunity to again address the topic of the artefact's production procedure (van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 107, 109): the large circular openings on the rounded top and/or under the flat base of the sarcophagus[24] were understood to be 'ventilation holes' useful during the process of 'open hearth' firing (as also proposed for the opening determined by the cut-out in the lid), while the small holes in the back of the specimen were reasonably interpreted as intended for the escape of decomposition products (Namdar *et al*. 2017: 729, 732).[25]

The theoretical observations ultimately seem to agree convincingly with the experimental deductions proposed by the studies and seem to provide a reasonable solution that draws inspiration from a technical tradition of a type of firing that is little documented in the near-eastern area, but found in this very specific class of production.

The origins of production

The scientific debate has universally recognised an Egyptian origin in the idea of a funerary container for the body: scholars have unanimously associated the origin of the phenomenon with the appearance in Egypt in the pre-dynastic age of stone sarcophagi (Hayes 1990a: 50; Grallert 2002: 191), which was later joined by the practice of mummification of the body, aimed at preserving the integrity of the deceased (Hayes 1990a: 79).

In Egyptian tradition, the appearance of the depiction of the deceased's features on the mummified body appears chronologically later and seems to have been initially entrusted to the creation of a face or mask-portrait using the technique of *cartonnage*,[26] partially replacing the physical features of the deceased concealed by the procedure of wrapping the body (Hayes 1990a: 309).

It is only from the Middle Kingdom, at the time of the Twelfth Dynasty, that the first wooden or *cartonnage* anthropoid specimens are documented. Like the portrait-masks, they not only had a replacement function for the body, but also an apotropaic protective value, since the depiction of details, such as the headgear (*nemes*), the false beard and the broad collar (*wsekh*) worn on the chest, gave the reproduction of the deceased an otherworldly divine aspect.[27]

Regarding in particular the use of clay sarcophagi in the deposition, the Egyptian documentation attests to specimens dating back to ancient times, but the specific anthropoid morphology is only known from the New Kingdom, the phase to which the first sarcophagi date back to the Eighteenth-Nineteenth Dynasty (Kuchman 1977/78: 11-12); the use of clay anthropoid sarcophagi would spread from the Twentieth Dynasty onwards, becoming prevalent (and characteristic) in the late period.[28]

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[23] Cotelle-Michel 2004: 35. Differently similar rounded applications have been interpreted as mandrake fruits in Galal, Aston 2001/02: 174.

[24] The circular openings on the Tel Shaddud sarcophagus have been carefully noted in van den Brink *et al*. 2017: figs. 13 (hole under the base), 15 (hole at the top).

[25] It should also be noted that the in-depth analyses carried out for that research have documented in the sarcophagus trace of substances which have led to the hypothesis of the use of wax as a sealing and insulating coating from the body fluids.

[26] The French term *cartonnage* defines a rigid compound made up of overlapping layers of bandages made compact with stucco, usually modeled in a plastic way and superficially decorated with painting and gilding, Leca 1976: 72; Hayes 1990a: 303; Ikram, Dodson 1998: 308.

[27] Hayes 1990a: 310-311; Hayes 1990b: 223; Handoussa 1981: 143-145; Grallert 2002: 191-192.

[28] Garstang 1907: 208; Kuchman 1977/78: 17; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 16-17. Use is also documented in Nubia and the eastern Delta, e.g. in Steindorff 1937: 72-73.

It has also been observed that in Egypt the anthropomorphic conformation of the container changes with time, distinguishing this type of clay sarcophagi from the corresponding anthropoid stone, wooden or *cartonnage* specimens.

The original shape of the lid of the clay sarcophagi, with a small operculum (as in the Palestinian specimens), is transformed in the late phases by lengthening to become morphologically analogous to that of the traditionally bivalve stone/wooden/*cartonnage* specimens, i.e. (Kuchman 1977/78: 18) with a lid as long as the container (as in the more recent variant Transjordan type cited among the findings).

According to an old stream of studies, clay sarcophagi in Egypt, being made of an inexpensive material to replace stone, were intended for the specific use of poorer classes (Garstang 1907: 207, fig. 226), although the Egyptian archaeological data do not allow for such clear-cut statements at all and rather show a variety among the materials chosen for sarcophagi used in burials (Galal, Aston 2001/02: 174-175). In recent studies, it has been argued that the use of clay sarcophagi was generally intended for members of the middle and lower classes of Egyptian society, whereas in the more marginal areas of the kingdom, in Nubia and the Eastern Delta, such use would characterise the military *élites*, even the wealthy (Higginbotham 2000: 91; Pouls Wegner 2015: 306), as in the case of the Palestinian area.[29]

Findings and interpretations

Scholars have over time proposed different readings of the picture offered by the archaeological data in the Palestinian and Transjordan area.

Finds of sarcophagi dating back to the Late Bronze II phase were recorded at the site of Beth She'an (Tell el-Hosn)[30] during excavations in the first half of the 20th century,[31] among the findings at Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir), a site of the Shephelah near Ashkelon,[32] and in the northern area at Tel Shaddud, a locality in the Jezreel Valley (van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 106-107, figs. 9-12).[33]

The sarcophagi found at Deir el-Balaḥ, on the coast near Gaza,[34] have been attributed to the final phase of the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age, while sarcophagi from other sites such as Tell Midrash near Beth She'an[35] and the composite group of numerous specimens of uncertain provenance that have found their way onto the antiquities market have been generically dated to the later part of this chronological span.[36]

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[29] In Deir el-Balaḥ the rich material furnishings of the contexts speak in favor of a wealthy social class, Dothan 1979: 98-99; in Lachish a clay anthropoid sarcophagus, painted with hieroglyphics and figures of Egyptian divinities (Isis and Neftis), does not seem to be attributable to the availability of an individual belonging to the *poorer classes*, Galal, Aston 2001/02: 176.

[30] The site corresponds to the ancient Scythopolis.

[31] About fifty sarcophagi and various Egyptian materials came from the excavation of the location believed to be the site of an *Egyptian garrison*, Rowe 1927: 38-41; K.N. Yassine traces these sarcophagi to type I of his classification and dates them to the 12th century BC, Yassine 1975: 58, fig. 1: 1-3.

[32] From the excavation of tomb 570 come two clay sarcophagi which bear an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription and have lids with a naturalistic decoration; K.N. Yassine assigns the specimens to type I of his classification and dates them to the 13th century BC, Yassine 1975: 58, fig. 1: 8-9; Dothan 1982: 276-278, fig. 15, pls. 22-24.

[33] From the site comes a clay sarcophagus attributable to the group with naturalistic decoration which is dated to the Late Bronze II phase.

[34] About forty clay sarcophagi with naturalistic and grotesque decorations came from the excavation of the site, Dothan 1982: 252-260; Cotelle-Michel 2004: 200-203; a vague dating has been proposed between the Late Bronze Age IIB, at the time of the Nineteenth Dynasty, and the end of the Bronze Age, within the horizon of the Twentieth Dynasty in Galal, Aston 2001/02: 175.

[35] From the site comes a fragment of the lid of a clay sarcophagus found out of context on the surface, Dothan 1982: 252, pl. 15; a dating corresponding to the final phase of the Bronze Age at the time of the Twentieth Dynasty has been proposed in Galal, Aston 2001/02: 175.

[36] For the collection of the National Museum of Jerusalem see Ornan 1986: 120-123; Arie 2016: 97.

Chronologically related to this last group attributed to the Iron Age are the few finds from hypogeal tombs in the Transjordan area,[37] i.e. from Sahab a sarcophagus attributed to the Iron Age I and dated to the 10th/9th century BC (Fig. 5: left),[38] from the area of the Royal Palace in Amman (Fig. 4) and from Pella specimens (Yassine 1975: 62) dated to the Iron Age I-II, between the 10th/9th-10th/7th century BC,[39] and finally from tomb TJ3 in Dhiban a sarcophagus (Reed 1957/58: 59-60) attributed to Iron Age II (Fig. 5: right) dated to the 8th century BC.[40]

An 'ethnic' interpretation that attributes the use of clay anthropoid sarcophagi in the Near East to foreign individuals, the Philistines or another group counted among the Sea Peoples mentioned in historical sources, has determined the conventional denomination by which these sarcophagi are also known. The 'ethnic' theory was suggested in the first half of the 20th century AD during Clarence Fisher's excavations at Beth She'an[41] but only gained wide acceptance following the brief commentary of W.M.F. Petrie who suggestively named the burials characterised by the discovery of these sarcophagi as tombs of the Philistine lords (Petrie 1930: 7).

The data were emphasised by W.F. Albright's considerations on the imitations of Egyptian culture in the neighbouring lands (Albright 1932: 305-306) and led G.E. Wright to express a convinced attribution of the use of such sarcophagi to foreign soldiers, Philistines or other Sea Peoples, hired as mercenaries in Egypt and operating in the peripheral regions of its border, south in Nubia and north in the eastern Delta, up to the neighbouring Jordanian-Palestinian area (Wright 1959: 65-66).

In the 1960s, with regard to the findings of clay anthropoid sarcophagi at Tell el-Far'a in the Wadi Ghazzeh near Gaza,[42] a hypothesis was affirmed (not widely shared by scholars) of a Mycenaean and Aegean influence in the architectural features of the *dromos* tombs dating back to the Late Bronze Age of the '900' necropolis (Waldbaum 1966: 335-336), determining an attribution of the burials to an earlier phase than the settlement of the Philistines in the area, traditionally placed at the beginning of the next chronological phase, i.e. the Iron Age I.[43] In order to resolve this discrepancy, it was therefore proposed to identify those tombs with the burials of *earlier groups* of foreigners (notably from Danuna and/or Akkaiwasha), associating the sarcophagi with the presence in the grave goods of so-called simple style pottery and a hypothetical Mycenaean influence in the local underground rock architecture.[44]

As a result of new findings, some aspects of these initial interpretations expressed by various scholars have been deepened. E.D. Oren (1973: 132-150) in his discussion of the anthropoid sarcophagi of Beth She'an refuted the hypothesis that the Late Bronze Age specimens could be connected with the Philistines or any other group belonging to the Sea Peoples (1973: 140), although at the same time he argued for the existence of a link between the headdress design depicted on some Palestinian sarcophagi (from Lachish and Deir el-Balaḥ) and some details visible on the depiction of these 'peoples' carved on the reliefs of the Temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu.[45]

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[37] Dornemann 1982: 136; Bienkowski 2001: 265-268; Herr 2009: 549-558.

[38] The sarcophagus attributed to the beginning of the Iron Age by W.F. Albright was awarded by K.N. Yassine to type II of his classification, a morphological type attested exclusively in the Jordanian area and dated to the 10th-9th century BC, Albright 1932: 305-306; Yassine 1975: 58-59, fig. 4.

[39] The fortuitous discovery of a hypogeum led to the discovery of five sarcophagi, of which only four were preserved and attributed by K.N. Yassine to types II and III of his classification: both types are equipped with numerous carrying handles arranged in parallel rows; type II with grotesque decoration is dated to the 10th-9th century BC, Yassine 1975: 58-59, figs. 2-4; type III, a simplified cylindrical 'cocoon' type without anthropomorphic figurative decoration, is attributed to the 10th-7th century BC, Yassine 1975: 59, figs. 5-6.

[40] The sarcophagus with an oval-shaped chest with a flat bottom, completed with a long distinct and slightly convex lid, constitutes type IV of K.N. Yassine's classification: this type is also distinguished by the presence of large bar-handles and a lid decoration with a small, stylized mask; it is dated to the 8th century BC, Yassine 1975: 59, fig. 7.

[41] Fisher 1923: 234-236; Vincent 1923: footnote 1 on page 439, 440-441, fig. 9.

[42] Three sarcophagi dating back to the final phase of the Late Bronze II were attributed by W.M.F. Petrie to the 14th/11th century BC and by W.F. Albright dated rather to the 12th century BC, Petrie 1930: 6-9, pl. 24; Albright 1932: 299-304.

[43] The Iron Age phase is documented in the so-called '500' cemetery.

[44] Waldbaum 1966: 339-340. Against the hypothesis of this hypothetical influence, see Stiebing 1970.

[45] The thesis presented by T. Dothan associates these drawings with the Peleset group known from the sources, even if it is possible to attribute them to three different groups of peoples (Peleset, Denyen and Tjekker, although the latter would be recognizable by the

Contrary to the initial interpretation of the studies, it was observed by L. Kuchman (1977/78: 16) that the only elements supporting the hypothesis of the Philistine ethnic identity of the deceased in the late-Ramesside tombs found by Petrie at Nebesheh and Tell el-Yahudiyeh seemed to be only the external appearance and the possible origin of the artefacts found in the grave goods, concluding that otherwise these tombs could be considered as burials of Egyptians of a type that is scarcely attested due to a trivial defect in the archaeological documentation (1977/78: 20).

The continuation of the excavations in Palestine and the discoveries in Deir el-Balaḥ led T. Dothan to articulate and deepen this ethnic interpretation by postulating the assumption that in an early phase dating back to the end of the Late Bronze Age, some Egyptian officials, or foreign mercenaries in their service, introduced the use of these sarcophagi in Palestine in areas under Egyptian control, as in the case of the fortress of Beth She'an or other important control centres in the region. According to the scholar (Dothan 1979: 101-103), this initial phase was followed by the adoption by the local dominant group of this funerary costume, which became characteristically 'Philistine' in the Iron Age I.

In support of this interpretation, T. Dothan (1982: 5-13, 288, figs. 1-3) has also furthered the comparison already proposed by E.D. Oren between the unique stylised design depicted on the clay lids and the depiction of the feathered helmet headgear recognisable among the details engraved on the Egyptian reliefs of Medinet Habu, a detail that iconographically distinguishes groups of 'Sea peoples' identified as Philistines (the Peleset of the Ramesside sources).

As part of this overall revision of the data in the light of the identification of 'Philistine' funerary customs, she (Dothan 1982: 252) also understood the peculiar character of the construction of rock-cut tombs with underground chambers, which other scholars had - as already indicated - attributed to an Aegean influence.

A strand of research dissatisfied with this ethnic identification has taken shape in recent years with an alternative view[46] that recognises in anthropoid clay sarcophagi a funerary custom adopted by a limited number of officers and/or military personnel in close contact with Egyptian traditions, but not necessarily foreigners exogenous to the territory, according to a hypothesis already formulated by T. Ornan (1986: 121) and also supported in his studies by A. Mazar (2011: 180). Scholars' misgivings have led them to associate this practice in the southern Levant and Nubian territories with members of a generic 'local elite...in regular contact with Egyptians' (Albright 1932: 305-306; Yassine 1975: 62; Yassine 1988: 38-40).

This connection with the Egyptian administrative/military apparatus has been widely agreed upon,[47] even postulating a possible use of the anthropoid sarcophagi as indicators of areas directly under Egyptian rule (such as Deir el-Balaḥ, Beth She'an, Pella) as opposed to territories in the region outside this control (Dornemann 1982: 136; Stager 1995: 342).

In the context of this interpretation, C.R. Higginbotham delved into the topic of the presence of Egyptian and Egyptizing materials in Palestinian contexts, questioning the pattern of cultural interaction underlying the data found in the area, but recognised alternative solutions according to different patterns of interpretation of the data. The instrumental use of material culture can in fact be understood both as an indication of the areas directly under Egyptian control (Higginbotham 2000: 129-132), but also as a simple external emulation of traditional Egyptian customs and traditions (Higginbotham 2000: 132-136). According to this last, rather reasonable and supportable proposed interpretation, the local (non-Egyptian) ruling groups would have aimed to assert their social status through the emulation of a distinctive funerary practice of the Egyptian ruling class (Higginbotham 2000: 242-245).

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presence of beards and would therefore be excluded), Oren 1973: 135-138, drawings 1-19 in the text on the pages 136-137. Recently on the subject J. Emanuel summarized the oscillations of scholars on the ethnic interpretation of the deceased and preferred a 'more holistic approach' underlining the value of aspects including 'appearance', 'social growth', 'self-representation' of the deceased, Emanuel 2015/16.

[46] Richter 2002: 245; Huot 2004: 102-103; Ben-Shlomo 2010: 96-97.

[47] Gonen 1992: 28-29; James, McGovern 1993: 239; Galal, Aston 2001/02: 173-177; Killebrew 2005: 65; Mazar 2011: 180.

This theory has been taken up and shared by various scholars,[48] such as the recent discovery of the Tel Shaddud tomb, dated to the late 13th-early 12th century BC (van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 123). In this case, the hypothesis has been put forward that the deceased laid in the sarcophagus is to be interpreted as a wealthy Palestinian operating in life as an official (perhaps an officer in the local military corps) of the Egyptian administration in the region (governed by the fortified centre of Beth She'an).[49]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To summarise, various scholars initially focused on the ethnic identity of the deceased identified as foreigners and their origin, while in later studies a typological (Oren 1973; Dothan 1982) or technological (Gunneweg 2014; van den Brink *et al*. 2017) approach was emphasised, focusing on the production factors of the artefacts and generally on the chronological aspects of the documentation. Recent studies have examined possible interpretations of the pattern of intercultural relations recognisable in this phenomenon, namely of reception or emulation (Higginbotham 2000).

The reduced presence of sarcophagi in the Transjordan area has led scholars to an approach centred on the analysis of funerary practice, which has confirmed its tracing back to a cultural model alien to the traditions of the local area (Dornemann 1982; Al-Shorman, Khwaileh 2011: 100-102).

This concise review of the scientific debate highlights that, regardless of the nationality or ethnic origin of the recipients, the funerary practice of using clay sarcophagi was adopted under a clear cultural influence of the Egyptian tradition introduced in the Near Eastern area by a *élite* of power derived from military/administrative authority or/and adequate economic availability.[50] The spread of this practice, which can be seen in the breadth of the attestations and the prolonged duration of the phenomenon, thus seems to be an indication of a likely progressive sharing by a non-restricted social group of this funerary custom.

The interest of scholars in the identification and evaluation of the social environment of the recipients has, however, left in the background the intrinsic singularity of the funerary custom of laying the deceased in dorsal *decubitus* inside an anthropoid sarcophagus, which emerges as unusual and innovative with respect to the prevailing local funerary custom that instead documents depositions in *decubitus* contracted on the side.

Studies of sarcophagi conventionally referred to as 'Philistine' have now made it clear that their use was adopted under the cultural influence of the Egyptian funerary tradition introduced by a group of influential and wealthy recipients: specimens are documented over a long period, between the late 13th and 7th centuries BC, beginning with Palestinian finds dating between the late Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I and extending into the Transjordan area with sarcophagi dated between Iron Age I and II.

This particular phenomenon must be considered the sign of the emulation of a model foreign to local traditions: following an episodic introduction into the area, probably spontaneous on the part of individuals or small numerically limited groups, it triggered a phenomenon of progressive sharing of the unusual funeral practice by a larger social group, for reasons of prestige and/or distinction.

The presence of these artefacts represents a specific chronologically and geographically distinctive cultural aspect that, however, does not exhaust the phenomenon of the attestation of anthropoid sarcophagi in the Near

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[48] Müller 2002: 186; Pouls Wegner 2015: 308-311; van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 127.

[49] van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 131; Namdar *et al*. 2017: 726; in particular, the military aspect is deduced from the presence in the funerary objects of an offensive weapon (a bronze dagger), van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 118, fig. 30; even a foreign influence in his diet has been assumed based on the remains of the consumption of a specific fish (Nilotic perch) documented by the context, van den Brink *et al*. 2017: 131, fig. 38a-b.

[50] The funerary contexts of Deir el-Balaḥ have testified to the broad economic viability of the recipients, as can be found in the grave goods of the deceased which include products from the international market; signs of the link with the sphere of power were also evoked for Beth She'an and Tel Shaddud.

Eastern area,[51] which are documented also in a different chronological phase during the Achaemenid period largely in Phoenicia and the Mediterranean Levant, but also in Mesopotamia and Persia, which deserve a comprehensive discussion elsewhere (Rossi 2023a and 2023b).

The review of the documentation ultimately revealed singular but clearly delineated modes and dynamics that testify to close intercultural relations between the eastern area and Egypt. The evaluation of the presence of anthropoid sarcophagi in the Levant region clearly revealed an emulation of a funerary tradition focused on preserving the bodily integrity of the deceased. In the Palestinian and Transjordan area, the appearance of the 'Philistine' sarcophagi can be interpreted as a phenomenon of adoption of an exogenous tradition by a group of individuals characterised by authority and considerable economic availability and seems to testify to an emulative relationship of a receptive (passive) type.

There are still margins of uncertainty about the final identification of the commissioners of the sarcophagi, due to the prevailing lack of the contexts in which the specimens were found, although the overall analysis of the materials and the historical events of the region undoubtedly demonstrate that this phenomenon attests to the presence of a strong bond of cultural and ideological attraction (and openness) towards Egyptian culture in the upper classes distinguished by authority and wealth in the southern Levant, which can be traced over a long period of time between the end of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age II.

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[51] Several scholars have underlined how the production of Phoenician sarcophagi dating back to the Achaemenid phase should be distinguished from the Palestinian and Jordanian production, Ferron 1993: 37; Elayi, Haykal 1996: 110; Richter 2002: 263; Lembke 1998: 105; in an extensive presentation of the Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagi, only plausible Egyptian or Greek influences are considered (found in the iconography and funerary use) in Lembke 2001: 117-119; Frede 2002: 79-80.

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