

A NOTE ON RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SOUTHERN LEVANT AND EGYPT DURING EARLY DYNASTY 0

By Eliot Braun*

Introduction

A recent preliminary publication of excavations at Ptora (MILEVSKI AND BAUMGARTEN 2008), a site at the northern edge of the Negev (Fig. 1) and near neighbor to Tel Erani (BRANDL 1989), sheds a thin ray of light on relations between the southern Levant and Egypt during the early years of Dynasty 0 (Naqada IIIA2-B). In that not well-defined period the southern Levant is sometimes referred to as the Erani C horizon or phase (BRAUN 1996; BRAUN 2012) of Early Bronze I, or, within a regional context, as “EB Ib 1” (YEKUTIELI 2000; 2006¹). The Erani C phase is named for several styles of pottery (BRAUN 2012 in press) identified with the eponymous site, although it is uncertain that those particular styles are actually associated with what its

excavators (KEMPINSKI AND GILEAD 1991; YEKUTIELI 2006) have identified as structures of Layer C² (see below). The regional distribution (Figs. 1,2) of those styles today includes the Gaza Strip and northward on the Mediterranean Littoral up to the environs of Tel Aviv, their adjacent inland piedmont (Judean *Shephela*) of south Central Israel, portions of the Judea-Samaria Incline, at least one site in the Jordan Valley, Jericho, and another in the Judean Desert.³

A medium-sized jar from Ptora (Fig. 3:3a-c), decorated in one of the Erani C Styles, is of particular interest because of its great similarity to two jars from a royal tomb in Egypt (Fig. 3:1,2). However, it’s typical south Levantine form, with two opposing ledge handles and external, “pajama style” decoration (i.e., white slip or coating over

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¹ The southwestern region of the southern Levant, roughly the Mediterranean Littoral of Israel and the Gaza Strip to the border of Sinai and the adjacent *Shephela*, or piedmont up to the Judean Incline, is also known as “Southwest Canaan” although “Canaan” is an anachronism prior to the second millennium BC.

² Although YEKUTIELI (2006) made a valiant effort through quantitative analysis to ascribe a recovered assemblage of pottery to Layer C, he was unable to ascribe it to any specific architectural features; several of which are assigned to that stratum. Neither is it possible, given the limited information available on the actual stratigraphy (KEMPINSKI AND GILEAD 1991), to assign specific objects from that level to any of the multiple phases of this stratum perceived by the excavators. From my knowledge of pottery of the period, as at any multi-period tell site, the published pottery assemblage, much of it fragmentary, is apparently derived from fills and thus, highly unlikely to be chronologically discrete. In my estimation it contains both residual and intrusive elements. Thus, the overall assemblage cannot be correlated

with specific buildings nor with adjacent structures excavated by earlier expeditions (BRANDL 1989 with references) leaving much uncertainty as to the true nature of the Layer C occupation (see note 2). Notably, their Building 232, a rectilinear mudbrick structure, is aligned with Building 7102 excavated by Yeivin, that apparently dates to a post-Erani C phase, as Yeivin’s (1961: Figs. 8–9, Plates VI–VIII) publication of it completely lacks illustrations of typical “Erani C” type pottery.

³ Included is Amaziya, a newly discovered site (MILEVSKI ET AL. MILEVSKI ET AL. 2012.) with EB I occupation where a small quantity of Erani C styles of pottery has been recovered. Hartuv has probably yielded the largest and most discrete collection of these styles (MAZAR AND DE MIRO-SCHEDJI 1996). Additional examples of these distinctive styles have been found at Nahal Yarmut (EISENBERG 2000), Ashqelon/Afridar, Ashqelon and other nearby sites (e.g., GOPHNA 1974: Figs 31:11, 32:4; OREN AND YEKUTIELI 1992: Fig. 12:5), tombs at Azor (PERROT AND LADIRAY 1980: Fig. 74:22,30; BEN-TOR 1975: Fig. 6:3), Ai (MARQUET-KRAUSE 1949: Pl. LXVII: 1.912, 40.856, Pl. LXXVII: 166a), at Jericho in tombs and on the tell (e.g., KENYON 1960: Figs. 12:5,7,28, 13:17,30, 14:3; 1965: Fig. 8:25) and nearby in the Wady Qelt (PRITCHARD 1958: Pl. 30:5,6,8), at Arad in Stratum IV (BRAUN 2011a: Fig. 6:2,3) and as intrusions in the Cave of the Treasure, Nahal Mishmar (BAR-ADON 1980: Illustrations 14:1, 16:1,4, 18:1).



Fig. 1 Map of Egypt and the southern Levant, marked with approximate delimitations of the distribution of the Erani C Styles of pottery in their homeland



Fig. 2 Map of principal sites in the southern Levant where Erani C style pottery has been discovered (see Note 1)

which thin, vertical stripes were applied; c.f. BRAUN 2012: 15, 17–18), are not the sole distinguishing similarities with those jars from Egypt. These vessels also have in common small, obliquely placed, raised segments of rope-like decoration on their shoulders (Figs. 3, 4:1-4, 5:1-2). Until the recent discovery of this vessel from Ptoza, with a single exception on a juglet from Hartuv (Fig. 5:2), such decorative features on south Levantine style EB I pots⁴ have been noted solely on examples found in Egypt (e.g., Figs. 3, 4:1-4, 5:1).

There may, however, be a slight difference between the jar from Ptoza and those from Egypt, as the former bears two such appliqués on opposite sides of its shoulder, while those from Egypt appear, at least in their several depictions in publications (see citations to Figures 3–5), to bear only a single decorative element. However, that observation may be a function of information derived from photographs and drawings, all of which show only a single, *en face* view of these vessels, as does the

published rendering of the Ptoza jar (MILEVSKI AND BAUMGARTEN 2008: Fig. 7:11; c.f., Fig. 3b, 3c).

Because of that Egyptian association, E. C. M. van den Brink and I (BRAUN AND VAN DEN BRINK 1998) hypothesized that these added, decorative elements were somehow associated with exportation to Egypt of ceramic vessels and presumably also, of their contents. While that hypothesis remains tenable, this newly discovered vessel from Ptoza offers further insights into the transference of artifacts from the southern Levant to the Nile Valley, in a period for which evidence is not abundant and sometimes even equivocal (see below, notes 5 and 7).

The vessel from Ptoza closely resembles two jars (Fig. 3:1,2) found in royal Tomb U-j at Abydos (HARTUNG 1993; 1998; 2001). One, U-j/50, is particularly significant as it has been identified through petrographic analysis by PORAT AND GOREN (2001: 408) as being of loessy clay. Loess is characteristic of the soils in the region of Ptoza and Tel Erani

⁴ This element should not be confused with multiple, short, horizontal lines of segments of rope-like decoration that

adorn many vessels of a later EB I phase in the southern region.

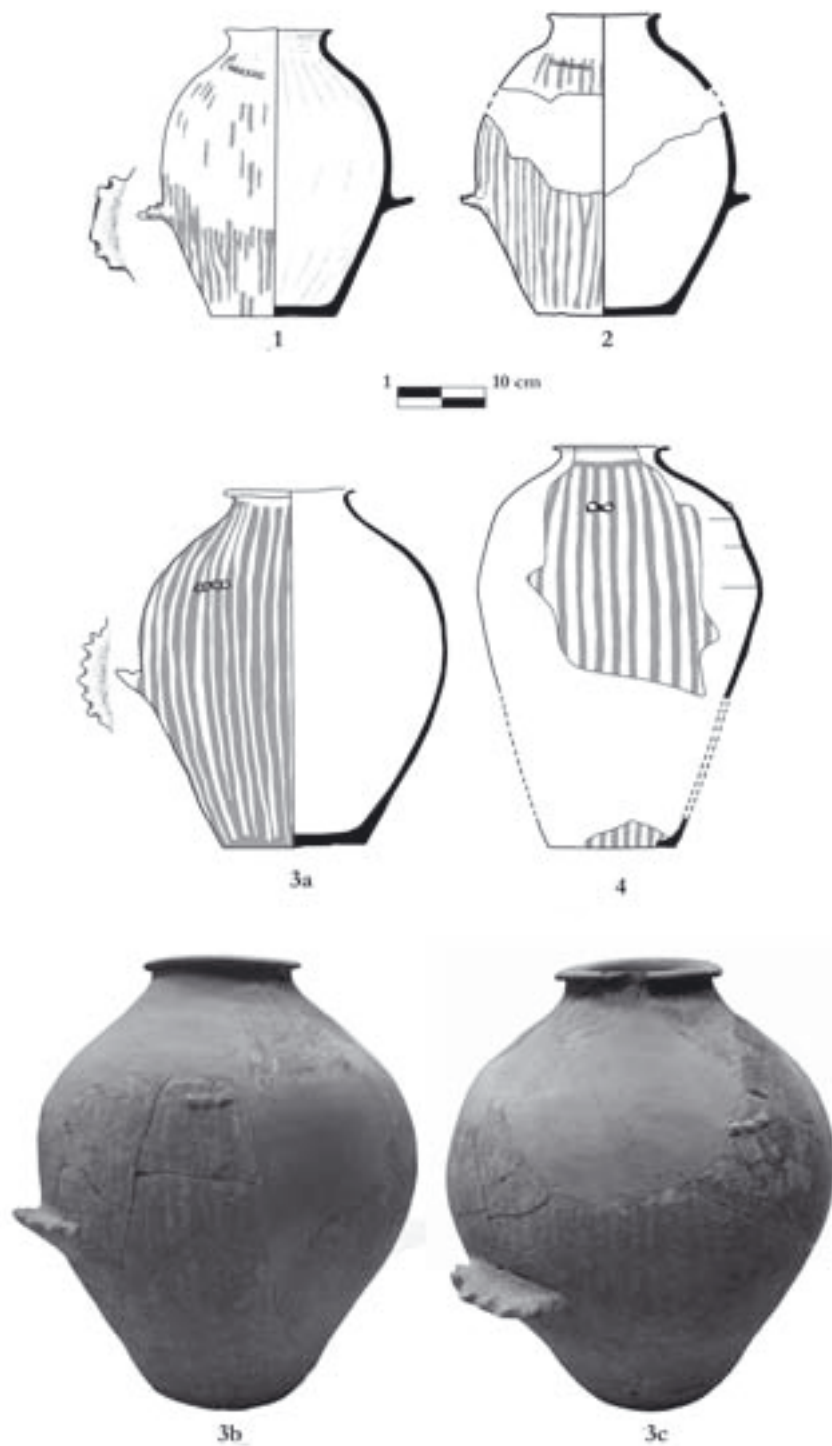


Fig. 3 Pajama Style Vessels with rope-like appliqués

- 1 From Abydos Tomb U-j, after HARTUNG 1998: Abb.61: 7/50
- 2 From Abydos Tomb U-j, after HARTUNG 1998: Abb.70: 11/17
- 3 From Ptora, after Milevski and BAUMGARTEN, 2008: Fig. 7:11
- 4 From Northern Sinai, after OREN 1989: Fig. 9:16



Fig. 4 South Levantine ceramic vessels from Egypt and the southern Levant bearing a special, applied segment of rope decoration and a south Levantine bowl

- 1 From Nagada, after KROEPER 1989: Fig. 4: b
- 2 From Minshat Abu Omar after KROEPER 1989: Fig. 2: a
- 3 From Abydos Tomb U-j, after HARTUNG 1998: Abb.64: 10/93
- 4 From Abusir el Meleq, after KROEPER 1989: Fig. 2: c
- 5 From Ptora, after MILEVSKI and BAUMGARTEN, 2008: Fig. 7:16

(BRANDL 1989) and was widely used for production of pottery (PORAT 1989: 52)⁵ in the period under consideration. The second jar, U-j-11/17 (Fig. 3:2), is quite similar but there is no information on the type of clay from which it was made. Although there are no analytical data on the fabric of the jar from Ptora, my recent examination of it with the naked eye suggests it is likely fashioned of a similar clay type.

Another jar from Abydos Tomb U-j, U-j 10/93 (Fig. 4: 3), also bears at least one of these distinctive appliqué, although it has oblique incisions around its neck⁶, a potter's mark, and does not appear to have been otherwise adorned. Unfortunately, there is no information on the likely origins of the fabrics of this and vessel U-j/11/17, although their morphol-

ogy makes it virtually certain they were imported from the southern Levant. Additional typical south Levantine style vessels that bear the same type of distinctive appliqué (although otherwise unadorned) have been found at sites in Lower, Middle and Upper Egypt; at Minshat Abu Omar (Figs. 4:3, 5:1), Abusir el Meleq (Fig. 4:4) and Naqada (Fig. 4:1), respectively. Yet another south Levantine jar, with a somewhat similar but apparently shorter appliqué, also decorated in the "pajama style" (Fig. 3: 4), was found not in Egypt proper, but at a site on the Way(s) of Horus on the coast of northern Sinai (OREN 1989). That find offers a clear indication of the route by which these vessels were exported to Egypt, and explains the presence of two similarly marked vessels at the Delta site of Minshat Abu Omar. Presumably such imports would have been transported upstream to sites in Middle and Upper Egypt from there, or from some other nearby "port of entry" into the Nile Valley.

The oblique location of these distinctive segments of raised appliqué seems to point to them as more than mere decorative elements. I suggest that they were so located as to make them easily distinguished from above, especially if vessels so marked were placed side by side amongst numerous others. The hundreds of pots found within Tomb U-j may testify for just such a need. Presumably the raised marks were coded indications whose meanings are obscure to us, but which indicated to the knowledgeable whatever special associations the containers and/or their contents may have had. Few in number (in both Egypt and the southern Levant), these marked vessels may have contained particularly precious substances, as possibly suggested by their presence in a royal tomb assemblage in Upper Egypt. Their occurrences in other tomb contexts could suggest associations with elites, but in those instances the specially marked pots may not have had the same significance as they would have had in the context of a royal sepulcher. Possibly they were prized for their prestige value merely as exotic, imported⁷ containers devoid of their original contents.

⁵ MCGOVERN (2001:408), who conducted Neutron Activation Analysis (NAA) on the same vessel suggested the possible origin of its fabric might have been in the region of Sahab in the Transjordanian Plateau. However, that hypothesis seems highly unlikely as the Erani C styles of pottery are not reported from that region.

⁶ This is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Erani C styles.

⁷ From the evidence of several easily distinguished south Levantine vessels in Tomb U-j, including U-j 7/50, it may be extrapolated that all exemplars within this small group of vessels were imported, whatever the ultimate origin of the other vessels in the assemblage (see above: Note 5).

S. Levant—Cultural Phase	S. Levant—Type Sites	Egypt—Cultural Phase
Early EB I (Initial phase)	Afridar (Area G)	Nagada IIC/D-III A
Early EB I (Advanced phase)	Site H, Wady GhazzeH	Nagada IIIA1
Erani C	Tel Erani (Level C)	Nagada IIIA2-B
Late EB I (Early phase)	Palmahim Quarry 2	Nagada IIIB
Late EB I (Late phase)	Horvat 'Illin Tahtit III Arad III (early phase)	Nagada IIIB-C/Late Dynasty 0—Early Dynasty 1 (between reigns of Narmer and Djer)
EB II	Arad III (late phase) Arad II Bet Yerah-Period C ⁸	Nagada IIIC/Dynasty 1 (reign of Djer)

Table 1 Correlations between Chrono-cultural phases of the southern Levant and Egypt

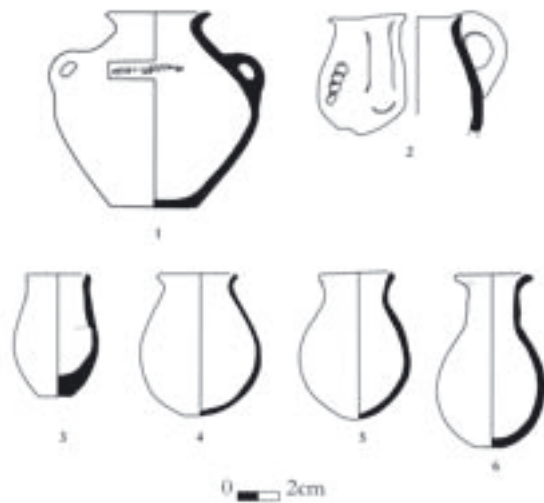


Fig. 5 South Levantine ceramic vessels without handles. Were these vessels influenced by Egyptian prototypes?

- 1 From Minshat Abu Omar, after KROEPER 1989: Fig. 4a
- 2 From Hartuv, after MAZAR and de MIROSCHEDJI 1996: Fig. 18:3
- 3 From Ptora, after MILEVSKI and BAUMGARTEN, 2008: Fig. 7:8
- 4 From Ptora, after MILEVSKI and BAUMGARTEN, 2008: Fig. 7:5
- 5 From Ptora, after MILEVSKI and BAUMGARTEN, 2008: Fig. 7:6
- 6 From Ptora, after MILEVSKI and BAUMGARTEN, 2008: Fig. 7:9

Summary

The vessel from Ptora bearing the distinctive applied decoration, best paralleled in south Levantine imported vessels in Egypt, suggests a direct connection between the northern Negev locale of that site and the Nile Valley. The royal association may be evidence of a preliminary foray by a burgeoning Egyptian polity into the southern Levant, and of its awakening to knowledge of resources available from that distant region, perhaps with special attention paid to the locale where the pots derive from.

Difficult of explanation in the archaeological record of the southern Levant, however, is a virtual lack of imported, Egyptian-related goods datable to the Erani C horizon. Claims of such imports at Tel Erani have been suggested by KEMPINSKI AND GILEAD (1991) and BRANDL (1992), but the non-south Levantine *bona fides* of those objects has been subjected to a serious scholarly challenge by YEKUTIELI (2006: 236), who, after rejecting the notion of Egyptian imports in Levels C and an earlier occupation, Level D at Tel Erani, saw fit to even question the identification of “Egyptianized” (i.e., locally produced pottery of Egyptian inspiration and/or morphology) pottery there. Similarly, the Erani C levels at its near neighbor, Ptora⁹, are also devoid of Egyptian objects and probably also Egyptianized items in the Erani C phase (MILEVSKI personal communication)¹⁰, although they are

⁸ In Eisenberg and Greenberg 2006.

⁹ Ptora is located ca. 2.5 km east of Tel Erani, on the northernmost fringe of the flat, loessy Negev Plain, where it merges with the *Shephela*.

¹⁰ Several published renderings (Fig. 5:3-6) from the site are from a nearby tomb, the utilization of which dates to a post-

Erani C horizon of EB I. A large bowl with thickened rim (Fig. 5:5) from Ptora might, based on its morphology, be construed as similar to Egyptian bowls and basins as Egyptianized, but once again its simple shape does not preclude it from being of local inspiration.

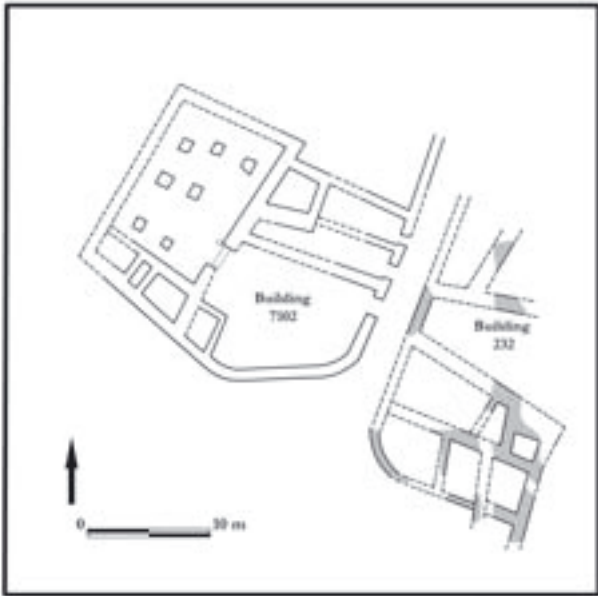


Fig. 6 Plans of Buildings 7102 and 232 at Tel Erani, after KEMPINSKI and GILEAD 1991: Fig. 4

found in a tomb dated to a late EB I phase there (e.g., **Fig. 5: 3-6**).

Identification of Egyptianized objects, especially pottery, is fraught with difficulty as in many instances it involves a great deal of subjectivity. Objects claimed as Egyptianized from Tel Erani are very simple, small, closed vessel types, bottles and drop or bag-shaped pots that lack handles (e.g., **Fig. 5:3-6**); a common “non-feature” in Egyptian ceramic morphology of that period.¹¹ In the absence of true Egyptian imports at virtually all sites in the southern Levant in the Erani C phase, it is difficult to hypothesize Nilotic influences on morphologies of bodies of small pots otherwise paralleled in many south Levantine vessels with handles (i.e., juglets and small jars).

The discovery of the jar from Ptora also raises questions concerning the Erani C ceramic assemblage at its eponymic site. While the pottery of Ptora has major similarities with that assemblage, the architecture at Ptora, far less sophisticated, is

marked by a very distinctive type of building technique that placed upright stones within fieldstone walls. That style of building is also known at Hartuv (MAZAR AND DE MIROSCHEDJI 1996), where most of the pottery is of the Erani C horizon. By contrast, Building 232, a mud brick multi-roomed, rectilinear structure ascribed to Layer C, is aligned with adjacent Building 7102 (**Fig. 6**). This latter structure, part of a large, apparently public complex of similar style construction that includes a sizable, multi-pillared hall, is suggestive of a significantly more sophisticated architectural tradition that appears to be associated with a densely populated quarter of a community of considerable proportions.

If indeed those structures date to the Erani C horizon, then they are evidence for the beginnings of complex, urban-like, hierarchical social system, one of the earliest, if not the earliest, in the southern Levant. That would suggest that nearby settlements at Ptora, Amaziya, Tel Halif and perhaps other sites would likely have been satellites of this larger settlement, with greater implications of inter-site social organization (MILEVSKI ET AL. 2012) and possible relations with Egyptians in that period.

However, despite YEKUTIELI’S (2006) valiant effort through quantitative analysis to ascribe the recovered ceramic assemblage to specific architectural features of Layer C, the task proved impossible and thus, we are left with only scant information from which to date the sophisticated architectural remains of Tel Erani. While the excavators of Building 232 (KEMPINSKI AND GILEAD 1991) indicated the stratigraphy in that precinct was dense and multi-phased, they nevertheless conflated Sh. Yeivin’s original stratigraphic profile of the adjacent part of the site (BRANDL 1989 with references) from 12 to four strata (*sic!*). With such a significant disparity in recognition of strata by different scholars between two adjacent precincts, we are left with the impression, once again¹², that the true occupational sequence of the site and associated ceramic assemblages remain to be properly determined.

¹¹ Others, claimed by BRANDL (1989) as “Egyptian”, albeit locally made, were done so because of their loessy fabrics and vegetal inclusions, thought to be imitative of Egyptian pottery. However, there is significant evidence to show that local ceramic traditions, dating back to earlier phases of EB I in the same region include such fabrics and tempers (DESSEL 2009: 42–59).

¹² Despite Yeivin’s claims that the Narmer *serekh* from this site derives from Stratum IV, the origin of the jar fragment into which it was incised prior to firing, remains elusive (BRAUN 2001a).

If the Erani C phase at its eponymous site is indeed represented by a large, well organized social entity such as represented by Buildings 7102 and 232, one may propose that it had some type of governance that could have engaged in large scale trade with Egyptians. As such, we can look to that polity at Tel Erani, which is contemporary with the end of the reign of the ruler of Tomb U-j, as a likely provider for the south Levantine imports found there. An alternate scenario, with a less socially sophisticated settlement at the site, would suggest that the Egyptians were in contact with it and/or other, similar south Levantine communities, any of which might have provided the Egyptians

with pots and presumably their specialized contents on an *ad-hoc* basis.

What is somewhat surprising is that for the present, with the exception of at best a handful of still unpublished fragments of Egyptian imports from a third site, there remain only some purported “Egyptianized” objects of dubious *bona fides* associated with the Erani C phase to suggest Egyptian influence in the southern Levant. Thus, the relationship, as presently revealed in the archaeological record, is marked by an almost unidirectional flow of durable artifacts from the southern Levant to the Nile Valley¹³, the extent of which remains a subject of controversy amongst scholars.¹⁴ It could even

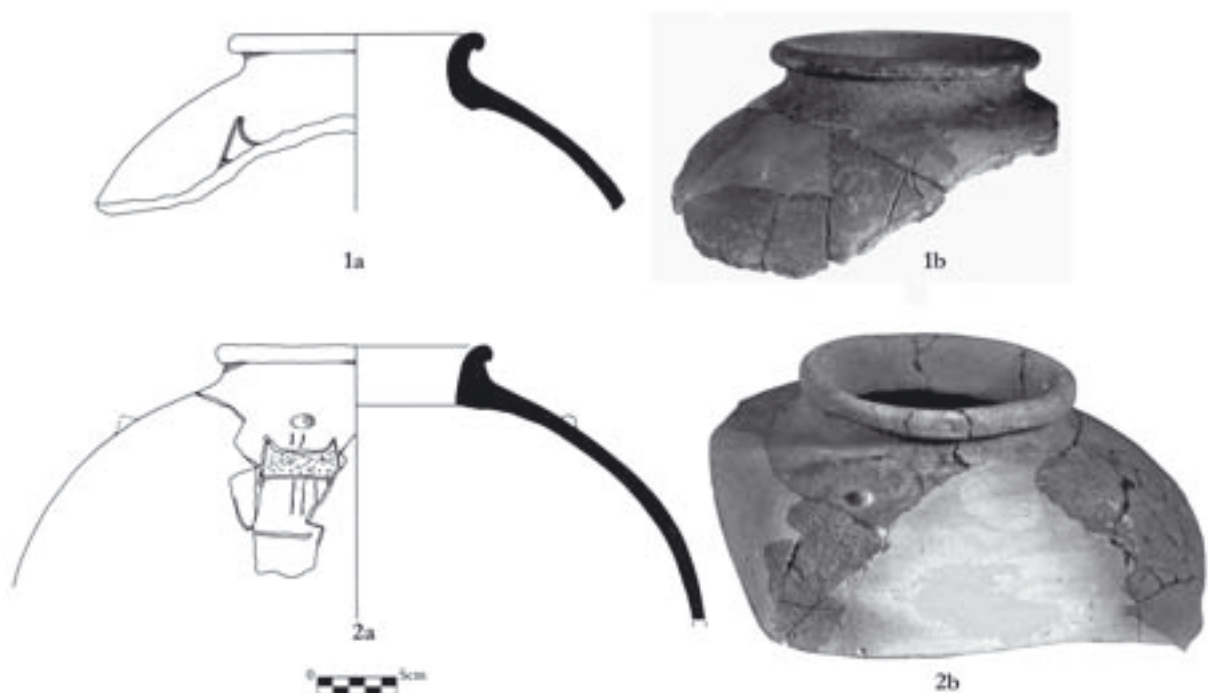


Fig. 7 Two *serekhs* on Egyptianized vessels, dated to Dynasty 0, after the reign of the owner of Tomb U-j and prior to the reign of Narmer. Photographs courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority

- 1 From Horvat 'Illin Tahtit (after BRAUN and VAN DEN BRINK 1998: Fig. 3b)
- 2 From Palmahim Quarry (after BRAUN and VAN DEN BRINK 1998: Fig. 3a)

¹³ There is evidence of desultory contacts between these regions dated back into the Chalcolithic period (BRAUN 2011b).

¹⁴ Although this subject lies beyond the scope of the present paper it is noted that the geographic origins of the bulk of hundreds of non-Egyptian style ceramic vessels from Tomb U-j at Abydos (HARTUNG 1993; 1998; medium-sized, bottle-like, flat-based vessels with long necks, *sans* handles) are disputed. McGovern (2001: 408) contests that hypothesis, claiming them to be “Syro-Palestinian” types based on re-

sults of Neutron Activation Analysis. While most scholars, including Hartung, appear to be in agreement with McGovern, PORAT AND GOREN (2001: 479), based on petrographic analyses, believe the bulk of the vessels, mostly handle-less bottles, were likely made in Upper Egypt. Notably, those particular vessels have close parallels neither in the contemporary southern Levant nor in Syria, although their overall morphologies are indeed somewhat similar to generic south Levantine ceramic vessel templates, particularly of jugs and small, two-handled jars.

suggest that it was the initiative of south Levantines, either directly or through middlemen in Sinai, who traversed the Way(s) of Horus to bring pots to the Nile Valley. It could also suggest that visitors from the Nile Valley to the southern Levant may well have been bands of adventurers and/or traders or perhaps even small groups of military personnel, who would have been equipped with light containers of organic origin, leather, straw and wood, which would not have been left behind or, if so, were not preserved in the archaeological record, thus accounting for our present understanding.

While the Ptora jar appears to represent evidence of some form of direct contact between one or another site in the south central region of what is now Israel, unfortunately it is not possible to be more specific as to its ultimate origin (see above). That jar and its close parallels in Egypt may even have been products of a single workshop of skilled crafts persons, but they cannot be absolutely identified as deriving from one or another site.

Unfortunately, after nearly a century of archaeological exploration of Early Bronze Age I sites in the southern Levant that includes large scale exposures of numerous occupations, there remains a complete lack of direct evidence for potter's workshops. That negative evidence strongly suggests that such ateliers must be sought in areas external to settlements, which in turn suggests the very likely possibility of centralized pottery production. There is, indeed, a modicum of evidence for just such a scenario in the relatively high level of standardization of some types of vessels in developed

phases of EB I (BRAUN 2009). Accordingly, it is impossible to point to Ptora, Tel Erani or any other site as the likely source of the imported jars (and incidentally their contents) found in Tomb U-j and at other locations in Egypt.

Considering the flow of great quantities of Egyptian imports into the southern Levant in the final phase(s) of Dynasty 0 (BRAUN 2011b), this earlier evidence of interaction may be understood as a time when Egyptian appetites, and in particular those of its Abydene rulers, were whetted for obtaining the resources of that distant region. Perhaps the earliest physical evidence for it in the archaeological record comes from the two Egyptianized *serekhs* found at Palmahim Quarry and Horvat 'Il-lin Tahtit (Fig. 7; BRAUN AND VAN DEN BRINK 1998). Later in Dynasty 0 a large permanent colony of Egyptians seems to have been established on the Way(s) of Horus at Tell es-Sakan (DE MIROSCHEDJI AND SADEK 2000) on the south bank of Nahal Besor/Wadi Gaza. It, and its satellite communities, appear to have developed a somewhat intricate set of relationships with the indigenous population, which accounts for the flood of Egyptian imports into the southern Levant and their irregular patterns of dispersion (BRAUN 2004; BRAUN AND VAN DEN BRINK 2008), and the flow of goods back to the Nile Valley late in Dynasty 0.

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