

## Depicting the others:

Late Bronze Age Southern Levant's cultural identity and adornment from the Egyptian view.

Reality vs. Perception

*Giulia Tucci*

The Egyptian presence in the Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age is to be considered as rooted and capillary on the territory. Nevertheless, by excluding some written sources as the Letters of el-Amarna, it is practically impossible to evaluate local perceptions and representations of who populated the region during this period. In fact, Southern Levant presents an extreme lack of human depictions and iconographies, thus Egyptian direct witnesses become very useful to provide a vivid picture of society and its prominent historical protagonists.

“Asiatics” depictions on reliefs, paintings and Egyptian artifacts, give us a quite punctual idea of who the Levantines were and what they wore during this period. The paper means to focus on the analysis of the personal ornaments by which “Asians” are identified and represented, as well as on the function of ethnic, cultural and identity markers these items represent in the depictions.

An iconographic and stylistic analysis will try to show the association between images and objects through material culture findings in and extra context, though bearing in mind the asymmetric vision the Egyptians had in perceiving themselves and representing other people, sometimes far more distant than it appeared.

### 1. Introduction: Egypt meets the Southern Levant

The Egyptian presence in Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age is to be considered as rooted and capillary on the territory. From the Battle of Megiddo (Redford 2003: 9; Weinstein 1981: 10), during the reign of Thutmose III, Pharaohs returned to the Levant almost annually with military campaigns (Burke 2010: 54). It seems that during the Amarna Era many Levantines immigrated to Egypt as merchants, soldiers, artisans, sailors and ambassadors; at the court of Amenhotep IV is in fact recorded the presence of many Asians in various relevant positions (Bietak 2007: 437). Conversely, since the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the Egyptian presence in the Southern Levant became stable with a possible co-habitation of Egyptians and local Levantine population in sites where Egyptian fortresses and residences had been built (Tucci 2016: 98).

During the conquest, it is clear from the Egyptian's scribes reports that a number of Asiatic workers and slaves were brought to Egypt. These, as we can see from the scenes immortalized on the

Egyptian monuments, arrived by land and by sea, usually they were prisoners of war but also dissidents and victims of internal turmoil in the cities of origin. According to their attitudes and abilities they found themselves occupying different positions in Egypt, with also tasks of responsibility (Redford 1992: 214)<sup>1</sup>.

During the Middle Bronze Age scenes depicting Asians were mostly related to the commercial involvement of the peoples of the East; from the 18th Dynasty began to appear representations of Asian mercenaries who served regularly in the Egyptian army, testifying to a process of allocation that began as early as the Middle Bronze Age. From the firsts Pharaonic campaigns in the Southern Levant, the representations also include processions of prisoners and bearers of tributes, as well as foreign princes paying homage (Sparks 2004: 28). Thus, it is probably during this period that the depictions of the Levantines assume the contours of the "enemy" or the generic "other/foreigner", being depicted also on objects of daily use as a demonstration of the familiarity of the Egyptians with such characters (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. Sandals with the depiction of foreign prisoners, from the Tomb of Tutankhamun (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)*

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<sup>1</sup> The movement of people from the Levant to Egypt is a phenomenon known since the Chalcolithic period. The flows of Asiatics who reached Egypt in the early periods spontaneously for reasons of trade and better living conditions, then become forced movements, with the Egyptians in extreme need of workers, craftsmen, mercenaries and soldiers. The Egyptians' expeditions to the East have always been motivated by the need for raw materials such as wood, but also wine and oil (Bietak 2007: 417-419).

Thus, these inward and outward movements contributed to a better Egyptian knowledge of the human neighborhood. From the New Kingdom on we have a variety of scenes of war and tributes (Aldred 1970: 105), and, due to the fact that Southern Levant presents an extreme lack of human depictions and iconographies, Egyptian direct witnesses become very useful to provide a vivid picture of Levantine society and prominent historical figures.

Starting with Thutmose III, the chronicle of Egyptian military operations and political outcomes is recorded in the so called “Annals”. The parts dedicated to the flows of peoples, tributes and gifts of foreign countries are of a great interest for this topic. In this period the pictorial counterparts of the Annals are the scenes of processions in some of the Theban private tombs (Panagiotopoulos 2006).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty we know from textual sources that Asiatics who had come to Egypt as prisoners obtained works and positions depending on their intelligence, skill and prior training (Redford 1992: 214). At the same time Egyptian specialists worked in Southern Levantine sites (Tucci 2018: 424).

## 2. Levantine iconographies in the Egyptian New Kingdom

Egyptian textual and artistic representations were based on a strong underlying definition of “us” versus “them”; moreover they demonstrated a great knowledge of the populations living beyond the Egyptian borders: Levantines, Libyans, Nubians and Aegeans are all well allocated in the geographical space (Mourad 2015: 13). Foreigners have an immediately recognizable type. North-eastern people from the Levant had typical features, but when they were not taken directly from a personal experience, the human figures might often present traces of hybridism of transference (Wachsmann 1987). Egyptian artists tended to mix elements belonging to separate entities, or to transfer figures and scenes from a rendition to another, in order to attain the most understandable result.

Egyptian representations present a great variety of human/ethnic stereotypes, but in the New Kingdom solar theology just four basic ethnic groups are incorporated: Egyptians, Asiatics, Libyans and Nubians (Tyson-Smith 2007: 218; Fig. 2); starting in the the Middle Kingdom, Levantine males are depicted with black or red coiffure, prominent aquiline nose, and often yellow skin (Posener 1971: 22).

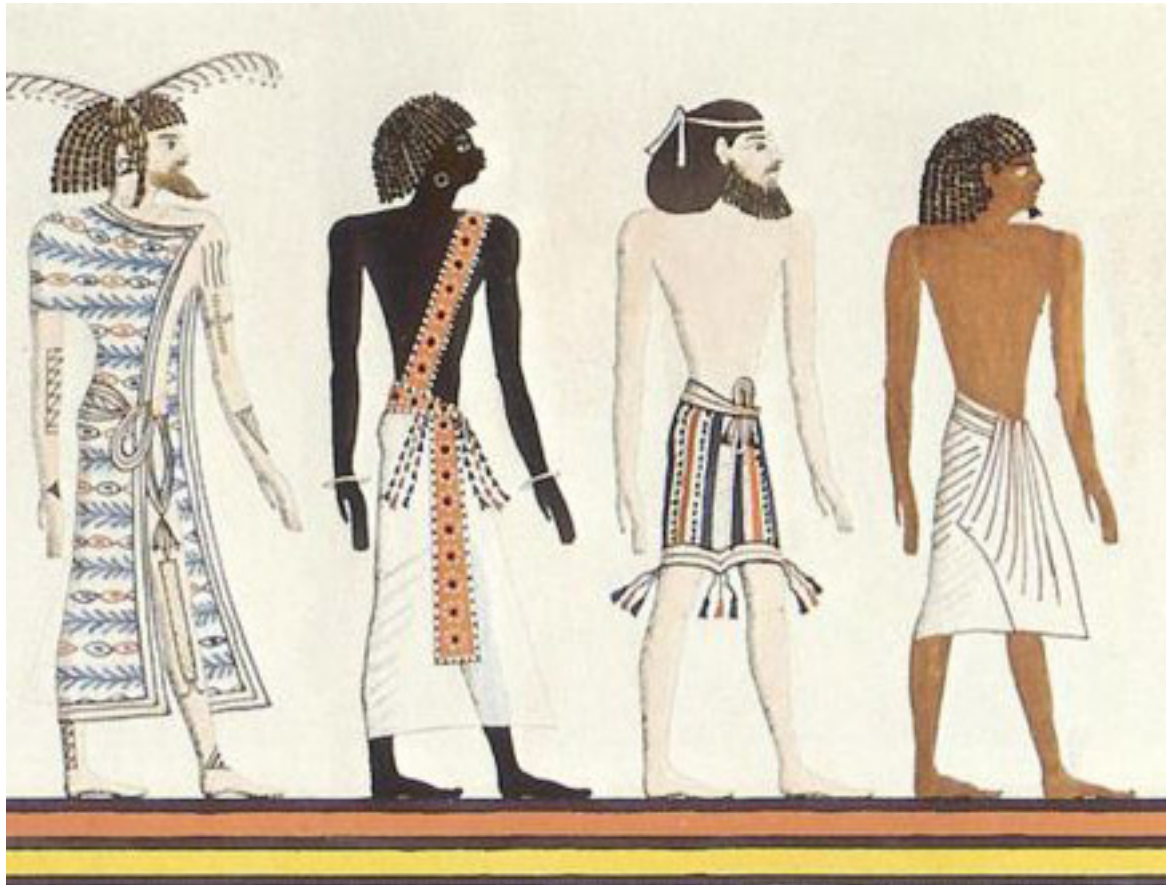


Fig. 2 Four human “races” depicted in the Tomb of Seti I, Valley of the King (Freiherrn von Minutoli 1827, pl. III).

Besides some recurrent physical features, also associations of personal objects were used to reconnect to a certain ethnic group: all this is then partly confirmed by the few Levantine representations of the local population.

In Egyptian representations there is a strong contrast between reality and perception and this artistic and propagandistic loophole is well explained by the concept of A. Loprieno who in 1988 speaks of *topos* and *mimesis*. *Topos* is an idealized view, a negative rhetorical representation usually motivated by power relationships, while the *mimesis* is the result of a real knowledge of what you are representing, of a contact that has taken place.

Despite the great ability of Egyptian artists to make aesthetic differences and portray their characters we can say that a certain vision of Asians remains rather unchanged in the Egyptian imagination. The representation of the caravan of merchants and metallurgy reproduced in the tomb of Khnumhotep II is a vivid example of this (Newberry 1893: pl. 31).

### 3. Jewels of the Levantine peoples in the pictorial representations

From what has been possible to observe from the few and preserved iconographic representations, it seems that Southern-Levantine taste in clothing, hairstyle and jewelry just partially evolved following neighborhood cultures. Despite this, the production of Southern Levantine jewelry in the Late Bronze Age has for too long been linked only to imitation and importation of Egyptian jewelry, with few attention to local expertise. My doctoral research has demonstrated the large amount and the quality of local production, along with the presence of local workshops in strategic sites (Tucci 2018: 419).

The original data of my PhD perfectly match with jewelry displayed by Levantine peoples in Egyptian representations. The recurrence of some ornaments in the pictorial representations, made specific personal ornaments become real cultural marker. The association of specific jewelry to an ethnic group usually follows criteria such those well enucleated by Dr. A. Golani (2010: 752): the object may have a distinctive shape with a specific significance and such object may have a defined geographic distribution.

In pictorial representations Egyptians often depicted Canaanites wearing rounded star or cross pendants (Sparks 2004: fig. 3.6.d; Fig. 3-4).



Fig. 3 Scene of Asiatic tribute-bearer, from the Tomb of Sobekhotep, 18th Dynasty (British Museum, London EA37987

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=1176536001&objectId=124908&partId=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=1176536001&objectId=124908&partId=1)).



Fig. 4 Detail from the footstool from the tomb of Tutankhamun (Egyptian Museum, Cairo JE 62030).

This pendant type (McGovern 1985: *typ. VI.G.2.c*; Tucci unpublished PhD *typ. C.I.*) is characterized by a metal (gold or silver) sheet worked in *repoussé* with the representation of a star. The final rendition of the artifact could be less or more elaborated. This typology, quite widespread in the Near East, but not in Egypt, dated mainly between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. In Southern Levant this specific pendant seems to be limited to the Late Bronze Age. The star emblem is connected with the solar god. In Southern Levantine contexts star-disk pendants are usually found in burials or cultic contexts.

The first representation of an Asiatic wearing a single anklet dated to the end of the Old Kingdom, otherwise this kind of ornaments are depicted to the latter half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium (Tufnell 1958: 39) (Fig. 5).

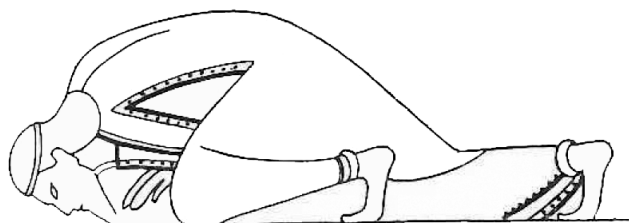


Fig. 5. Levantine chieftain wearing anklets (after Tufnell 1959, fig. 4).

According to O. Tufnell (1958: 5) the fashion of wearing anklets spreads in the Northern Iran during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. The use of large solid metal rings is attested in the Southern Levant from the Bronze Age to the Persian Period, and beyond. Ethnographic parallels show the tradition of adorning bride with anklets in pairs (Granqvist 1931: 60). The iconography, pictorial and burial evidences show that anklets were common both for female and male (Golani 2013: 151), young and adult, although the use of multiple examples are limited to women who have reached sexual maturity (Tucci: in preparation). The use of anklets in pairs was possibly connected with an audible effect (Meyers 1992: 256). The Egyptian representations of Asiatic dignitaries show, in few cases, men kneeling down with just one anklet.

### Excursus: Distinctive Southern Levantine adornments

To give a clearer overview of the local Levantine jewelry of the Late Bronze Age it seems useful to provide some data on the objects more markedly connected with the populations of the Southern Levant. Without going back on the rounded star or cross pendants and anklets already described above I will present other type of objects.

Some scholars claim that the tradition of piercing earlobes to insert earrings and therefore the custom of wearing this ornament is of Asian origin and that it spread to the Nile Valley, passing through the northern territories of the Delta, or from the neighbors Nubian, only at the beginning of the 18th Dynasty (Brovarsky *et al.* 1982: 227). From this moment on, Egyptian craftsmen began to produce a wide range of earrings of various shapes, copied, emulated or exported throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin.

In the Southern Levant, however, it is possible to find some earrings that are unparalleled outside the region. One of the best examples, even for the limited geographical spread is the drop/bud shaped earrings. These items are made in two parts the hoop and the three-lobed shaped pendant (McGovern 1985, *typ. IV.H.1*; Tucci unpublished PhD *typ. A.II*) (Fig. 6). Few sites have returned this typology of earrings: Beth Shemesh, Deir el-Balah and Tell el Far'ah South, (Grant 1932: pl. XLIX:22 Grant 1931: pl. XVIII; Dothan 1979: fig. 164; Dothan 2008: 154; MacDonald - Starkey - Harding 1932: pl. LI:1-3), but the specimens found are virtually identical<sup>2</sup>.

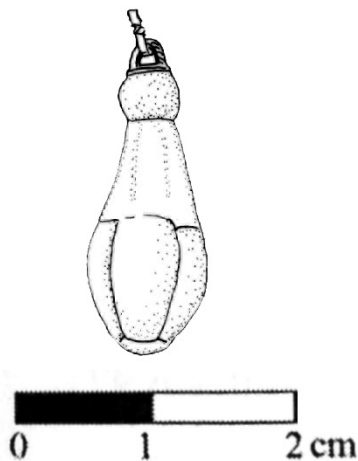


Fig. 6. Drop/bud shaped earrings from tomb 118 at Deir el-Balah (Dothan 1979, fig. 164; redrawn by G. Tucci).

<sup>2</sup> Just one example was found in the North of the region at Ugarit/Ras Shamra (Schaeffer 1935: 144 fig. 6).

Rather common in the Southern Levant is the crescent shape body pendant (McGovern 1985, *typ. VI.B.1*; Tucci unpublished PhD *typ. E.I-II*). The specimens found are all in silver gold, electro, bronze or alloys<sup>3</sup>. These objects are made with a crescent with a circular or square section to which at the top is welded a tubular element for suspension, often decorated with engravings or repoussé. This type of pendant also known as “bull's horns” is widespread in the Near East since 2000 BC, in the Southern Levant these pendants appear at the end of the Middle Bronze. this pendant was probably worn in association with the lunar divinity because of its shape (Ilan 2016). This pendant is also visible around the neck of some recently found female pottery figurines from the Tel Burna site (Sharp McKinny - Shai 2015:63) as well as around the neck of the basalt statue of a seated male figure, found inside the so-called Sanctuary of the Stele of the Lower Town of Hazor (Keel - Uelingher 1998: fig. 4; Fig. 7).

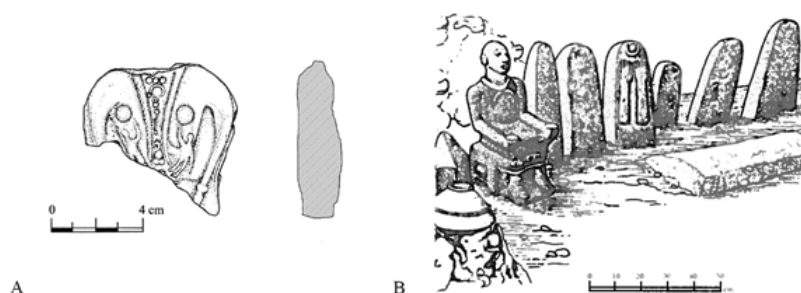


Fig. 7. A) Female pottery figurine from the Tel Burna site (Sharp McKinny and Shai 2015: 63); B) Sanctuary of the Stele of the Lower Town of Hazor, Area C (after Keel and Uelingher 1998, fig. 4).

The pyriform laminettes, reminiscent of the female pubic area, are widespread throughout the Levant area, worked in repoussé with representations of nude frontal female figures (Tucci unpublished PhD *typ. D.I-II*). In this iconography the gods of Ishtar, Astarte, Hathor, Asherah and Qudshu have been recognized. K.R. Maxwell-Hyslop (1971: 141) divides the figurines into two categories, the representational and the pictorial one, according to the rendering of the features belonging to the figures represented. The diffusion of these pendants is in the Southern Levant starting from the Middle Bronze IIB, most of the specimens come from Lachish, Megiddo and Tell el'Ajjul.

<sup>3</sup> Just one example in onyx from Tell el-'Ajjul (Petrie 1934: pl. 20: 154).



The hypothesis related to these particular ornaments is that they were objects of a private cult, as apotropaic amulets, for those who wore them and, that on the occasion they could become an *ex-voto* dedicated in places of worship.

Canaanites, contrary to what is known to the Egyptians, used to fast the clothes toggle-pins. The pins, usually in metal, but sometimes also in bone or ivory, widespread since the Middle Bronze Age, are not found in portraits of Levantines but we have various examples of the object found in the funerary context that clarifies its use (Sparks 2004: 33).

Particular objects come from funerary contexts, they were metal foils with a width of less than 4-5 cm decorated in repossè or engraving (but also not decorated) that were placed on the mouth of the deceased. These ornaments have been little studied and often confused with diadems to be placed on the head. There are not many examples found in the Southern Levant (Ben-Arieh - Edelstein 1977: pl. VIII:7; Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 120-121; Rowe 1930: pl. 39:2; Guy 1938: pls.128:10-11; 165:12-17; 168:15).

#### 4. Ethnicity and jewels as ethnic or cultural marker

Ethnicity<sup>4</sup> is an inherent feature of a definable and identifiable group or individual, connected with race, language and cultural roots (Tucci: In preparation). At the same time the ethnic element is self-determined and negotiated by social relationships (Barth 1969); thus ethnic identity is both a biological-hereditary fact (Geertz 1973: 19) and a superstructure of a group or individuals that allow a reciprocal recognition and a differentiation from others. The inherent features that define the ethnicity are a common name, a common foundation tale and a common history, a same language and religion, a common territorial provenance and a shared sense of community (Smith 1996: 6). Ethnicity in the archeological record passes through the material culture of a group. The ethnical elements of a population may undergo phenomena of respect, elimination in case of submission and domination or cultural entanglement or hybridization in cases of coexistence and assimilation, when facing another culture. Distinctive cultural traits may appear also in textual sources and iconographical representations, in this case it is important to take into account if the group is representing itself or if the image is the product of a foreign element, and it is fundamental as well to detect the ultimate purpose of the representations. Different cultural markers may be

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of “ethnicity”, the research on the subject and therefore its application on the archaeological field has been the subject of a careful re-evaluation in recent years. See for an introduction Moreno Garcia 2018.

displayed in different circumstances, in order to express different meanings (Moreno García 2018: 2) The Levantine representations in Egyptian iconographies have been used as a symbol of conquest and power. It is likely that soldiers did not wear any kind of ornamentation during the battle, and prisoners were deprived of their possessions; nonetheless in Egyptian depictions some foreigners wear their jewelry: I can assume they are here both a symbol of their *status* or wealth and an identifying mark of their provenance<sup>5</sup>.

Some classes of materials, of course, are better as cultural markers, such as tools and implements for food preparation and consumption, but also personal, portable objects as jewelry and ornaments. Due to its personal nature jewelry is a clear method to proclaim ethnical and cultural belonging (Golani 2014: 270); as for dress and ornaments, they are a non-verbal communication means still in use today.

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<sup>5</sup> The same phenomenon is found in the representations of the Nubians, directly close to Egypt and certainly better known in the Egyptian perspective. See van Pelt 2013.

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