

The appeal of subjugation

Artistic evidence of Pharaoh's propaganda in the southern Levant during the 18th–20th Dynasties

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The article proposes an interpretative revisit of a rather well-known and widespread iconographic motif in Egyptian art: the depiction of the Pharaoh striking his enemies. The scenes of subjugation constitute a red thread that connects all pharaonic dynasties, with an obvious propagandistic purpose to benefit the power of the Pharaoh, and more extensively of the imposition of Egyptian order against the chaos created by everything outside the empire, reason to take foreigners prisoners and therefore punished. The analysis develops on the double strand of monumental art and glyptic media, with a comparison of the diffusion of the two media and an in-depth study of scarabs dated between the 18th and 20th Dynasty found in the southern Levant.

Keywords: Propaganda; scarabs; Egypt; southern Levant; pharaoh; subjugation

1. Introduction^{1 2}

According to Hodder (1990) style is not arbitrary, but results from active selection of meaningful objects that can be understood only in their broader social context, as it is a dimension rooted in time and space (Conkey and Hastorf 1990: 1).³ In this sense Hodder's theory is partly followed by M. Feldman (2006: 73) in which she states that 'there is no absolute definition of style, but rather a range of operative definition varying with user and analytical task to be performed.' Thus, she prefers to use the term *style* 'to describe the minutiae of formal details.'

¹ I thank Dr. Zachary Thomas for his kind review of the English text.

² The article is written within the framework of the research project "Stamp Seals from the Southern Levant," funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Sinergia project CRSIIS_La6426), a collaborative project between the universities of Zurich, Bern, and Tel Aviv. The directors of the project are Christoph Uehlinger (Zurich, coordinator), Silvia Schroer (Bern), Stefan Münger (Bern) and Ido Koch (Tel Aviv). The author would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for its financial support.

³ "Style is not separated from the social contexts that give the cultural materials in question their social values" Conkey and Hastorf (1990: 1). For a state of the art on "style" theories in anthropology and archaeology I would refer to the recent Root 2019 chapter.

As noted by Schapiro (1953: 287) 'the style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible. It is also a vehicle of expression within the group, communicating and fixing certain values of religious, social and moral life through the emotional suggestiveness of forms.' Schapiro's theories, despite being much quoted, although saving some of his thoughts, have been subjected to criticism (Root 2019).

Binford (1965, 1986; see also Dunne 1978 and Sackett 1982, 1986), have made a division between style and function, debating the relationship of style with technology as a "way of doing."

Wobst (1977) then adds the concept of enculturation according to which "style" is a product of the social condition in which it is born. The role of the community that produces a certain style is also central in the discourse of M. Feldman (2014).

The "use" of style in archaeology has often developed following the path of *history of art*, analyzing the material culture and all kind of representations both in what they are and how they were realized, and at the same time Hodder suggest that "style" is "a way of doing, where doing includes the activities of thinking" (Hodder 1990: 45).

Style is also often considered to draw a line between homogeneity and heterogeneity: the differences were read as traces of others, linked to diffusion, trade, continuity and migrations.

Starting from this assumption, how is it possible for a different culturally-based society to understand symbols and features of power that were apparently far from their original context? Even if this could seem a contradiction in terms, it is the basic process for the Egyptian royal propaganda in the Levant during the Late Bronze Age.

2. A few words about propaganda

First of all it is important to define my use of the term "propaganda." Propaganda expresses the precise will to convey a message commissioned by a restricted group of people, in this case the dominant ones, and directed to a large part of the population, in attempt to persuade, to promote or to influence them. One of the definitions of propaganda in the Oxford English Dictionary is 'the systematic dissemination of information [...] in order to promote a political cause or point of view,' while in the Italian Treccani we can read "action that tends to influence the public opinion, directing collective behaviour"⁴

⁴ Original: 'azione che tende a influire sull'opinione pubblica, orientando verso determinati comportamenti collettivi' (translation by the [author](#)).

The second definition adds to this meaning elements of the media through which ideology is disseminated.

Around 100 years ago, in 1921, the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (who had a veritable passion for archaeology as is recognizable from the theoretic basis of his doctrine) published the essay *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (English title: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*). Within the context of Europe nearing the totalitarian affirmation of Nazi-fascism, Freud foresaw in his theoretical analysis a reflection on the fanaticism that would push the masses to conform, hypnotized by their leader, with whom they would identify maniacally. According to Freud's thesis, if on the one hand this idealizing identification results in the loss of critical thought and freedom, on the other it compensates them guaranteeing the refuge of identity. For this very reason, according to Freud, masses identifying with their leader have a deeply religious connotation.

If on the one hand the spread of this mass ideology can be described as the emergence of a pre-existing drive which had been, until then, kept dormant, on the other hand a fundamental role of propaganda actions put in place by the leader (Führer, Duce or... Pharaoh) and his *entourage* must be recognized in the dynamics of this awakening.

From this point of view, if the goal of propaganda is polarization and the conquest of affective components and of the interests of the masses in a specific direction, its language must bear the characteristics of ultra-simplification and obsessive repetition through the capillary diffusion of connotatively epitomized symbols⁵.

Egyptian texts, especially those reporting battles, events or biographies, are filled with propagandistic elements; as stated by Simpson (1982: 266), Egyptian art is mostly propaganda, the function most of the time is not just decorative.

Material goods and their associated symbols are being used also to mask relationships of inequality and domination as part of religiously sanctioned world-view (Earle 1990: 75), however with the Egyptian domination in Canaan the role of dominant and dominated were pretty clear, with very few spaces for interpretation⁶.

Thus, big reliefs on temple walls had a double perspective: the attempt to impress the viewer and at the same time to show the mighty figure of the Pharaoh, and to justify his role in the history.

⁵ I would like to thank Dr. Mario Cucca for this brief introduction. Dr. Cucca suggests among other studies Lippmann (1922), Allport and Postman (1947), Lazarfeld and Merton (1971), Freud (1981), Shapiro (1984), Pratkanis (2001), and Perelman and Olbrechts Tyteca (2008).

⁶ Taking into account, however, on the ground of reality was more entangled and with bi-directional influences than was then represented.

Legitimizing his figure, one would probably expect a better reception or at least little or no resistance to his rule.

3. The subjugation scenes: same scene, different media

The motif of subjugation of foreigners is a common theme in Egyptian art from the very earliest period,⁷ and the way in which the Egyptians depicted the foreigners does not necessarily imply a xenophobic character (Roth 2015: 156). Relevant at this point is the schematic summary proposed by Loprieno (1988: 8), in which the foreigner is represented first as a negative counterpart of a “Nilocentric” vision in the Old and Middle Kingdom and then in the post-Amarna era where a certain degree of cultural exchange with Asian peoples is recognized; in particular this latter scenario has also been more recently corroborated by Schneider (2003: 157), who proposes Egypt as dynamic and alternative to isolation.

Therefore, it is likely that there was a certain percentage of foreigners in Egypt who had adapted to live as the subjects of the Pharaoh, and not as subjugated by him. As evidence of this, as Schneider (2010: 144) has said, the term to identify foreigners (*ḥ3s.tjw*), could not be applied to those who, although not born in Egypt, now lived within the borders of the kingdom.

The inward and outward movements of people in and out Egypt contributed to a better Egyptian knowledge on its neighborhood:⁸ during the Middle Kingdom, scenes depicting Asiatics mostly related to commercial involvement of people from East. From the 18th Dynasty few Asiatics were represented as mercenaries in the Egyptian army and with the intensifying of the campaigns against the Levant, Asiatics become the personification of the enemy made captive (Tucci 2019: 118).

In other scenes the king could be personified by an animal, a lion in the majority of cases, such as in the hunting scenes or in the scene in which the lion tramples on enemies;⁹ interesting enough is a

⁷ Such scenes are not exclusively to Egyptian culture, but can also be found in the Near East, such as the representations of battles and victories of the Neo-Assyrian rulers (Nadali 2001-2003: 54 foll.)

⁸ A number of foreigners from the Levant, must have taken up permanent residence in Egypt, as a result of economic or war-related migration (See e.g. Sparks 2004). Almost certainly, however, these fringes of the population, which retained their own cultural identity, were reabsorbed into the local social fabric, particularly if they had some technical skills.

⁹ For a discussion on this topic see for example Davis (1992: 133). One of the first appearances of a lion in the scene is on an alabaster palette from Saqqara, 1st Dynasty (Hall 1986: Fig. 7). Here the lion appears just as a spectator. In a relief on a door jamb from the Merneptah Palace at Memphis (19th Dynasty), the lion is trampling on the same enemies hit by the Pharaoh (University Museum of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia E17257). There are few other examples of animals in this kind of scene. See e.g. Hall 1986: 47.

particular scene in which both the Pharaoh and the lion appear together, reinforcing the meaning of the scene itself.



Fig. 1. Door jam. Palace of Merneptah, Memphis. 19th Dynasty (Philadelphia, University Museum of Pennsylvania E17527).

The first attestations of the depiction of the Pharaoh smiting enemies date to around 3330 B.C.E., as part of wall painting in tomb No. 100 at Hierakonpolis, a large tomb possibly indicating social stratification¹⁰. The standing man, hierarchically bigger than other characters, is depicted in the act of smiting a row of human figures linked together by what appears to be a rope. The man is wielding a

¹⁰ A fine updated summary regarding the topic is Cohen (2019).

club and the bound characters are probably prisoners. The Narmer Palette (ca 3100 BC), is the second famous example in which the scene of smiting is depicted. The symbolic meaning of the entire decoration on the palette is well known (Luiselli 2011: 14). The palette was found inside the Hierakonpolis¹¹ temple dedicated to Horus and the monument is the manifesto of King Narmer's virile power, uniting Egypt and defeating his enemies. This could be said to be placed in the temple to commemorate and remember a key political event in Egyptian history.



Fig. 2. Tomb 100, Hierakonpolis. 220 BC ca. (after Luiselli 2011, fig. 1.1)

The image became quite common during the Old Kingdom and the following periods.¹² One of the major variations occurs in the New Kingdom, with the multiplication of the captives (sometimes there are nine prisoners, as the Nine Bows) who are now kneeling, almost lying at Pharaoh's feet. This multiplied reproduction is intended to reinforce the image of the Pharaoh and his power of control even over the world outside the Egyptian borders (Luiselli 2011: 16). One could summarize the diffusion on several devices of the image of the sovereign smiting enemies as in the table below.¹³

¹¹ The concentration of finds with such a figure near Hierakonpolis could be an interesting topic to investigate further, but this is beyond the scope of this research. See also an ivory cylinder seal with three superimposed registers with this motif repeated (Hall 1986: fig. 6).

¹² This is not the place for a long list of templar reliefs in which the scene appears, see e.g. Hall (1986) and Luiselli (2011). In the Old Kingdom there is a flowering of stone markers with this theme, many found in the Sinai desert near Wadi Maghara.

¹³ The motif endured in the Egyptian imagery beyond the classical periods, since the Roman period, as we have a scene in the exterior wall of the Roman Mammisi in the Dendera Temple.

What was considered “accessible” was likely that which was highly visible in open public spaces, or widely circulating. In the case under analysis, we have an example for both: reliefs on temple walls and small portable items.

<i>Pre-Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom</i>	<i>Middle Kingdom</i>	<i>New Kingdom</i>
Tomb walls	Wall reliefs	
Funerary temple walls		Temple walls Rock carving
Stone markers	Royal Stelae	
		Private Stelae ¹⁴
		Small sculptures
Ceremonial Palettes		
Ivories		Ivories
		Plaques and Ostraka
	Ceremonial Weapons	
	Jewelry	
Cylinder Seals		Scarabs

Table 1. Different media and periods of diffusion of the “Pharaoh smiting” scene

The equivalent of the scene also appears in the texts, where the scene is described in words and not drawn. As noted by Filer (1997: 52), the power of the Pharaoh is equated with his ability to inflict wounds. Thus in *The Story of Sinuhe*, dated to the Middle Kingdom the Pharaoh is called ‘the smiter of foreign lands.’ Amenhotep II, in the Amada Stela (Pritchard 1955: 248) is described back after ‘he had slain with his own mace the seven princes who had been in the district of Tagashi.’

4. Rituality or reality?

The scene of the Pharaoh smiting enemies, as suggested by Roth (2015: 157) may represent the ceremonial execution of a foreign captive, not necessary a living human being but a substitute, like a statue, as we can see from the sculptures of kneeling captive ready to be executed (Metropolitan

¹⁴ Schulman (1988: 8) narrows down the phenomenon between the 18th and 20th Dynasty.

Museum of Art 64.260). However, it cannot be denied that this practice was the reality at the conclusions of the battle (Bader 2017: 68).

In this sense, I do not agree with the definition of these representations as just emblematic of a precise historical event, ‘scenes that lack historical specificity and depict the Pharaoh smiting foreign enemies or leading bound captives’ (McCarthy 2003: 59).¹⁵ In fact, one cannot totally exclude that they do not have a limited narrative purpose of describing a ritual or something that really happened on the fringes of a battle.

The gesture of smiting the enemies was a clear prerogative of the Pharaoh (represented both from his human figure, or by his name),¹⁶ there are no officers, even of high rank, engaged in this operation.

Both in texts and depictions it seems that the gesture that is part of the divine act of rule of the king, and inflicting cranial injuries is perceived as something “moral or legal” (Filer 1997: 59).¹⁷

As noted by Bader (2012: 216) ‘foreigners were considered to endanger the cosmos and justice and thus, must be ritually crushed (*topos*), aptly expressed by the ritual of killing of foreigners in Egyptian art.’¹⁸

Since the enemies were almost all foreigners, the meaning was clear: Egypt itself (i.e. Egyptian people) embodied by the Pharaoh figure, represented hierarchically bigger than the other characters, and the captives, the strangers accused of being the cause of unrest and therefore representing chaos. For the (local) Egyptian subjects of the Pharaoh, it was therefore a struggle between good and evil, in which they perceived themselves as the Good, the right side of the dispute and their leader was the Pharaoh. The motif gains such an appeal leveraging the common sense of danger coming from outside. A feeling that justifies expansion outside one's own borders (Wylson 1979: 164).

As correctly noted by Routledge (2004: 29) hegemony is a more powerful concept when it is seen as being constituted by both the coercive (law, discipline, punishment, and retribution backed by the use or threat of force) and consensual (e.g. religious sanction, system of values, emotional dispositions) elements of state power.

¹⁵ McCarthy (2003) proposed to classify the representations of the Pharaoh dominating foreign enemies in two distinctive categories. The emblematic one, abbreviated (see above), and the narrative one, in which complex battle scenes were depicted “many of which may be correlated to historical events,” e.g. the Qadesh battle’s relief at Abu Simbel.

¹⁶ The king’s name was part of the royal ideology, a substitute for the image, scarabs and other seals transporting royal propaganda in the most direct way, e.g. bearing the Pharaoh’s name (Münger 2018: 41).

¹⁷ Male’s prerogative. We have just the depiction of Nefertiti, Amenhotep IV’s queen, smiting enemies with a scimitar in hand (see e.g. Matic 2017).

¹⁸ The different Egyptian approach toward the group of foreigners and the singular foreign has been well explained by Loprieno (1988) with the contrast between the *topos* and *mimesis*.

But what effect should this have on a foreigner? Surely it could instill the awe, the fear ... But the presence of a god overseeing the sacrifice gave the scene something ineluctable, preordained (Leprohon 2015: 313) legitimizing it in the eyes of most.

The scene of offering the prisoners to a god of the Egyptian pantheon are trace of what Sales (2018: 296) claim as ‘ritual violence.’¹⁹ In many of the scenes, a deity appears (Amun-Re, Re-Horakhty, Horus, Ptah...), often also the ‘sword of victory,’ the *khepesh* (a curved scimitar) is offered to the Pharaoh by the divinity itself.²⁰ The analysis of Sales (2018: 308) is that the scene represents an entire divine favor in granting Pharaoh the military victory.²¹

Physical evidence suggesting human-sacrifice are little in Egypt,²² but this is not real evidence either way, as the bodies of the condemned were probably not given the same attention in burial and therefore preservation was not a given.²³ Despite this, Campbell argues that prisoners of war were almost certainly publicly executed (Campbell 2020: 135), moreover enemy leaders, brought to Egypt after a military victory,²⁴ had to enjoy particularly violent (and spectacular) treatment.

The practice of mutilating the defeated in battle, well represented in the depictions, was also thought to be purely symbolic, but findings of numerous hands at Tell ed-Dab‘a have provided tangible evidence of the practice (for a recent article see Candelora 2021).

These majestic scenes, as mentioned above, occupy the walls of important and representative buildings in a grand manner. Their positioning is also not random. As noted by Sales (2012: 95) ‘the Medinet Habu’s tower [entrance pylon] fulfilled a double function of protection: on one hand as a physical structure, imposing and powerful, served as a defense for its “owners”...; on the other hand, through the magic message released from the reliefs, acted as a “supplementary defense” against all potential assault from Egypt’s enemies.’ These images inscribed in the stones have the value to perpetrate the victory of the Pharaoh virtually forever and against all sorts of enemy.²⁵

¹⁹ In this sense I rather prefer to call it “ritualized” violence. A violence that is made part of a ritual.

²⁰ See the description of the Southern Levantine scarabs.

²¹ However, Sales (2018: 309) also emphasizes that some scenes could represent something real, albeit through exaggeration.

²² The posture of the decapitated individual used as a foundation deposit in the Temple of Mut in Luxor may be one of this (Campbell 2020 and Anonymous 2012; see also Janzen 2013: 317).

²³ *Contra* see Campbell (2010: 128): ‘Given the remarkable preservation of human remains from ancient Egypt, and the centuries of archaeological work conducted in Egypt, there is surprisingly little physical evidence of state-sanctioned violence against living (or even dead) victims.’

²⁴ See e.g. the relief of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. The king is depicted bringing the Hittites and Kushite prisoners in front of Re-Horakhty and Amun-Re.

²⁵ For a summary of the matter I also recommend Matic (2017: 104-106).

5. The glyptic material

Two main considerations push an analysis of this subject beyond Egypt's borders: the subject *per se* and the hypothetical propagandistic purpose. The scene is well known also from private and royal stelae dated to the New Kingdom and may point to two different scenarios: the commissioning of the king to undertake a war or the victorious outcome of the war with the killing of the enemies. As often happened the scene may be a fusion, or an abbreviation between the two meanings, as also suggested by Schulman (1988: 60-62 and 1994: 267).

Aside from stelae and stone markers, the motif is visible in small, personal and easily transportable objects, such as the stamp seals, and it is likely that scarabs motifs took inspiration from this kind of "bigger" and more visible supports.

Scarabs and seals are one of the ubiquitous Egyptian small finds in archaeological excavation of sites dated to the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age and as said by Higginbotham (2000: 250), the motif of the king smiting a foreign captive is not uncommon between the Late Bronze Age IIB and Iron Age IA.

Recent studies (e.g. Ben-Tor 2011 and Lalkin 2008) proposed that, in contrast to the scarabs found in the southern Levant from the Middle Bronze to Late Bronze Age IA-B generally considered to be locally produced, what is dated to later periods is of exclusive import from Egypt.

From Egypt we know several examples of this iconography on scarabs, most of which come from private collections, or from excavations undertaken at the beginning of the last century less common is the depiction on rectangular plaques and signet-rings.



Fig. 3. Scarabs from Egypt with “Pharaoh smiting enemies” scene (Petrie 1889; Petrie 1906; Hall 1913; Hall 1986 and Metropolitan Museum of Art – New York).

The motif appears on three solid rings (or signet rings) from Egypt, all listed in the book by Hall (1986; Figures 1 and 3).²⁶ Of particular interest is the specimen from Saqqara in the Brooklyn Museum (37.726E). The ring shows a solid silver ring soldered to an unusual square bezel (Keel 1995: Type III or Tucci type B.2.a).²⁷ An object of great value, it shows a scene on the bezel in which the Pharaoh strikes an enemy kneeling at his feet and apparently with a severed hand.

The material collected in Egypt proposes a consistent date ranging from the 18th to the 20th Dynasty. Stamp-seals from Southern Levant (mainly modern Israel and Palestine) collected and analyzed in this paper are 22 in total and share the same temporal range from the 18th to the 20th

²⁶ The second one is a ring in gold with square bezel in sardonyx, dated to Psmatik I (Paris, Musée du Louvre E.3704).

²⁷ Tucci “Between Methodology and Anthropology. Research Perspectives on Signet Rings” in press.

Egyptian Dynasty (or Late Bronze II-III) with a peak concentration between the 19th and 20th Dynasties.²⁸

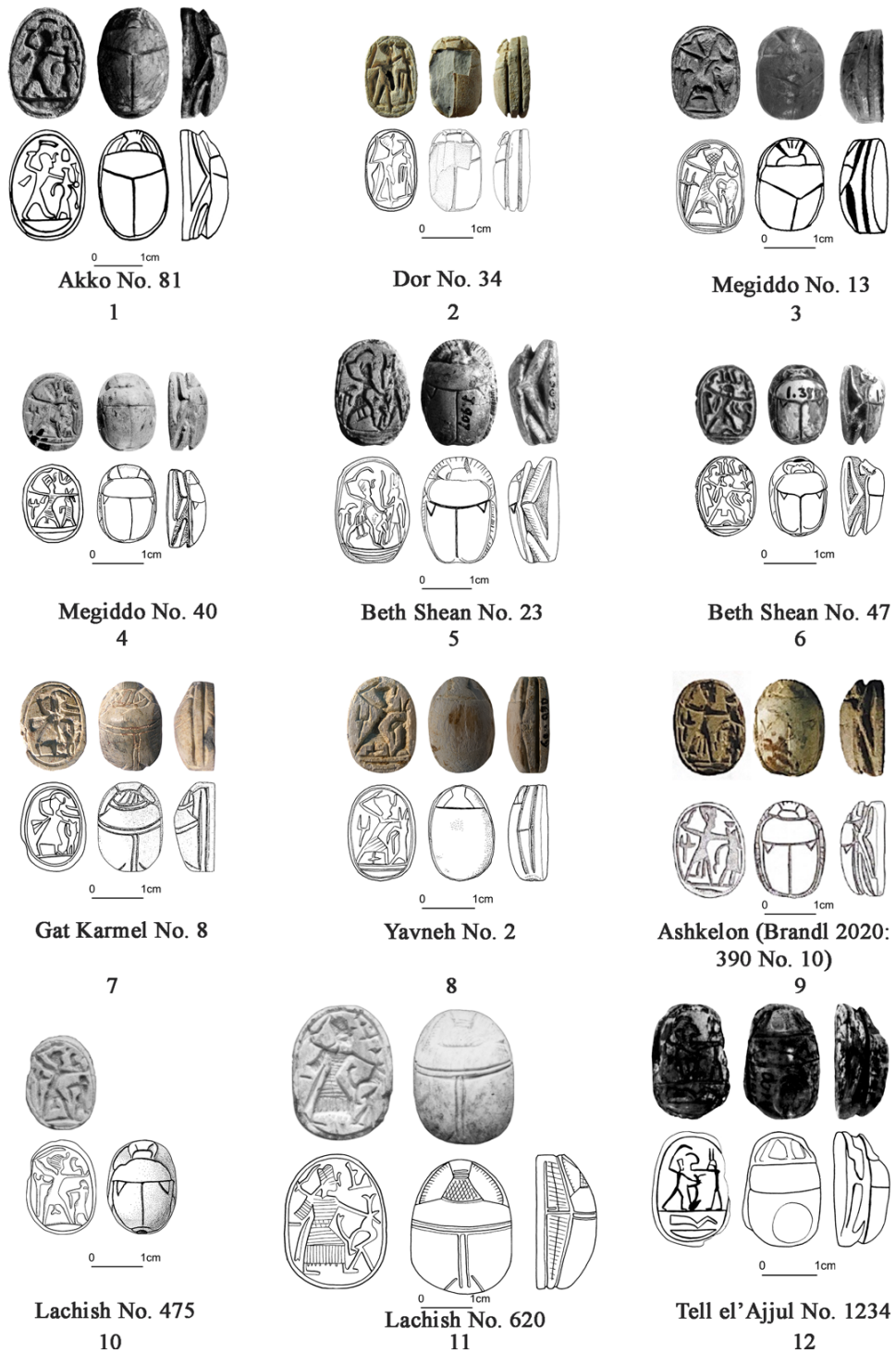


Fig. 4. Scarabs from Southern Levant with “Pharaoh smiting enemies” scene (1-12) (for sources see footnote 27).

²⁸ Considerations of distribution in relation to contexts is deferred in the following section.

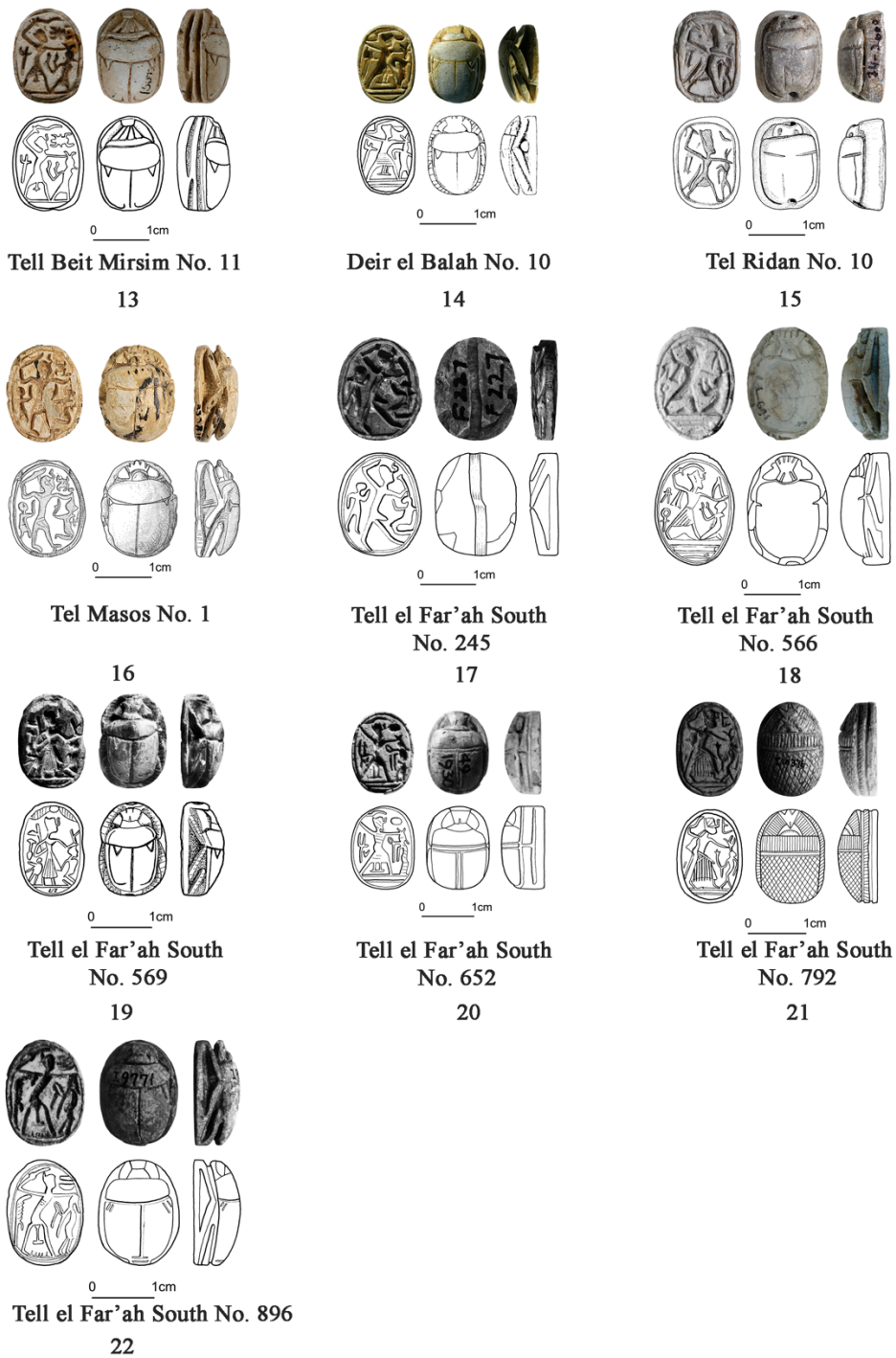


Fig. 5. Scarabs from Southern Levant with “Pharaoh smiting enemies” scene (13-22). (for sources see footnote 27).

Name	Context	Date	Typ. features	Figure	References
Akko No. 81	Surface find	19 th -early 20 th Dyn.	HC 57; EP 27; Side 27	1:1	Keel 1997: 558-550, No. 81
Dor No. 34	Locus cleaning	Iron	HC 65?; EP 27; Side 19	4:2	Keel 2010: 396-397, No. 34
Megiddo No. 13	Hoard	19 th -20 th Dyn.	HC 65; EP 27; Side 19	4:3	Schroer 2018: 140-141, No. 1029
Megiddo No. 40	Unknown	19 th -20 th Dyn	HC 64; EP 32/33; Side 27	4:4	Keel 1994: 14-15, n. 10, Pl. 11:25
Beth Shean No. 23	Temple	19 th Dyn.	HC 9; EP 33; Side 22	4:5	Keel 2010: 106-107, No. 23
Beth Shean No. 47	Temple	19 th Dyn.	HC 50; EP 33; Side 22	4:6	Keel 2010: 118-119, No. 47
Gat Karmel No. 8	-	19 th -20 th Dyn	HC 15; EP 61; Side 19	4:7	Keel 2013: 126-127, No. 8
Yavneh No. 2	Tomb	19 th Dyn.	HC 67; EP 1; Side 42	4:8	Keel 2017: 10-11, No. 2
Ashkelon (Brandl 2020: 390 No. 10)	?	19 th Dyn.	HC 9; EP 32; Side 29	4:9	Brandl 2020, 390 No. 10
Lachish No. 475	Tomb	19 th Dyn.	HC 13?; HP 33; Side 23	4:10	Tufnell <i>et al.</i> 1958: Pl. 36-37:243
Lachish No. 620	Palace	19 th -20 th Dyn	HC 7?; EP 49?; Side 28	4:11	Tufnell <i>et al.</i> 1958: Pl. 39-40:391
Tell el-‘Ajjul No. 1234	Unknown	19 th Dyn.	?	4:12	Keel 1997: 522-523, No. 1234
Tell Beit Mirsim No. 11	Residential quarter?	19 th Dyn.	HC15; HP 33; Side 38	5:1	Keel 2010: 46-47, No. 11
Deir el-Balah No. 10	Tomb	19 th -early 20 th Dyn.	HC 9; HP 33; Side 22	5:2	Keel 2010: 406-407, No. 10
Tel Ridan No. 10	Tomb	19 th - 20 th Dyn.	HC 63; HP 27; Side 43/44	5:3	Lalkin 2008: No. 498
Tel Masos No. 1	Surface find	19 th - 20 th Dyn.	HC 57; EP 32/110; Side 27	5:4	Giveon 1978: 107, Fig. 58 a-b

Tell el Far'ah South No. 245	Tomb	19 th - 20 th Dyn.	?	5:5	Keel 2010: 134-135, No. 245
Tell el Far'ah South No. 566	Tomb	19 th - 20 th Dyn.	HC 10; HP 3; Side 27	5:6	Keel 2010: 270-271, No. 566
Tell el Far'ah South No. 569	Tomb	19 th Dyn.	HC 9; HP 33; Side 27	5:7	Keel 2010: 272-273, No. 569
Tell el Far'ah South No. 652	Tomb	19 th - 20 th Dyn.	HC 30; HP 61; Side 12	5:8	Keel 2010: 306-307, No. 652
Tell el Far'ah South No. 792	Tomb	19 th - 20 th Dyn.	HC 53; EP 80; Side 12	5:9	Keel 2010: 362-363, No. 792
Tell el Far'ah South No. 896	Tomb	19 th -early 20 th Dyn.	HC 5; EP 34; Side 27	5:10	Keel 2010: 404-405, No. 896

Table 1. Summary of scarabs in Figures 4 and 5.²⁹

The Southern Levant has been linked to Egypt since the Protodynastic period and the Old Kingdom, being a privileged bridge to the interior of Mesopotamia, but also to the northern regions (Syria and Lebanon) rich in raw materials.

²⁹ Credits for the published objects are as follows: Akko No. 81: Keel 1997, drawing © Keel/BODO created by unknown; Dor No. 34: Keel 2010, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Megiddo No. 13: registration made by Dr. B. Greet, photo © unknown, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Megiddo No. 40: registration made by Dr. B. Greet, photo © unknown, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Beth Shean No. 23: Keel 2010, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Beth Shean No. 47: Keel 2010, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Gat Karmel No. 8: Keel 2013, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Yavneh No. 2: Keel 2017, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Ashkelon: Brandl 2020, 390 No. 10; Lachish No. 475: registration made by Dr. T. Beuthe, photo © SSSL/Ashmolean Museum created by Dr. B. Greet, drawing © SSSL created by I. Berney; Lachish No. 620: registration made by Dr. T. Beuthe, photo © unknown, drawing © unknown created by C. Mlinar; Tell el-'Ajjul No. 1234: Keel 1997, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Tell Beit Mirsim No. 11: Keel 2010, drawing © Keel/BODO created by U. Zurkinden; Tel Masos No. 1: registration made by Dr. T. Beuthe, photo © IAA/SSSL created by M. Goldemberg, drawing © SSSL created by I. Berney; Tel Ridan No. 10: registration made by the Author, photo © IAA/SSSL created by M. Goldemberg and S. Flit, drawing © SSSL created by U. Zurkinden; Tell el Far'ah South Nos. 245, 566, 569, 652, 792, 896: Keel 2013, drawing © SSSL created by U. Zurkinden.

During the Middle Kingdom, there is an intermittent interest of Egypt in the Levantine regions, characterized by trade and relations between courts.

It is however, during the New Kingdom, that the Egyptian presence established itself in the Southern Levant, first with a series of military campaigns and later with the creation of outposts and fortresses across the territory (Tucci 2016: 89).

The Ramesside period (19th-20th Dynasty), has been defined as ‘essentially characterized by the struggle to regain what was lost during the Amarna period, is characterized by stabilization of power with the Kadesh treaty (see below) and ends with Egypt’s last conquests in Palestine lost and settled by new inhabitants’ (Xekalaki 2021: 3939). That is, in my opinion, quite a reductive view of the engagement of the Ramessides in the Southern Levant, given that the archaeological traces left from Egyptians in the territory are much more frequent and widespread than what we have for the 18th Dynasty, especially indicative of the ongoing contacts between part of the local population and Egyptians.³⁰

Only one object seems to deviate slightly from these dates (Dor No. 34, dated to beginning of the Iron Age). This scarab does not show any particular differences in the back, and seems to differ slightly in its simpler and more schematic engraving style than the other specimens.

As well as their parallels found in Egypt the favorite medium is that of the scarab, and so far, we do not know from the southern Levant these representations, for example on signet-rings.

The common features of the scarab back is HC9 (head), EP33 (back) and 27 (side).³¹ The head can be slightly different and the back can present or not humeral callosities (V-shaped marks) and a single or double suture line.

There is not an extreme variety regarding the backs of the scarabs and to underline that also the variety of the engravings on the bases is limited to few variations. There is not a full correspondence between type of back and engraved motif.

The center of the represented motif is an anthropomorphic figure, identified as the Pharaoh, in some cases represented hierarchically bigger than other characters incised on the base. The Pharaoh is in most cases dressed with a short skirt (*šndw*) from which hangs one or two central tassels, rarer the

³⁰ Koch (2021: 127) suggest that the process began in LB IIB and reached its peak at the end of the 13th century B.C.E. As also noted by Martin (2011: 273) ‘first Pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty, [...] apparently made no attempt to establish a permanent military or political authority over Canaan.’ For a discussion about the 18th Egyptian Dynasty presence in the southern Levant see also Höflmayer (2015).

³¹ According to Rowe (1936) types, preferred to Ben-Tor (2007) being the proposed types more pertaining to the exemplars of the Late Bronze Age; see Table 2.

long skirt, decorated with parallel incisions. In few cases the bows that hang from the pharaoh's costume are longer (Lachish No. 620 and Tell el Far'ah South No. 792 and maybe Tel Ridan No. 10).

The Pharaoh also wears in almost all cases the so-called "blue crown" (*ḥprš*). Skirt and helmet crown are accessories usually used in war clothing, as we know from various other representations, such as the Qadesh battle's relief at Abu Simbel or the Medinet Habu reliefs.

From the shoulders of some of the Pharaohs descend two ribbons, which are also part of the headdress, the uraeus on the forehead is symbolically representing the protection against attacks.

Rare, on the scarabs, is the use of the Atef Crown, which is usually associated with funerary contexts and with the god Osiris. The crown could be identified also with the Hemhem Crown, worn by Ramesses II in aggressive attitude, called also the Triple Atef Crow.

The posture of Pharaoh is the same on every scarabs, represented in profile, leaning forward with one leg in front of the other, the left arm raised and the right holding a character in front of him, in the act of striking.

The raised arm, usually the left one, holds what appears to be a curved sword (*ḥpš*). There do not seem to be any instances in which Pharaoh wields a mace, as instead it appears some times in the coeval monumental reliefs, and sure it appears in previous representations. In the New Kingdom the use of the mace by the Pharaoh could be an anachronism, as this specific weapon was in use during battles until the Middle Kingdom. Other weapons depicted in wall reliefs are sickle, sword, javelin or axe.

Concerning the arm stretched forward holding the prisoner by the hair, a careful analysis would suggest that from the anomalous shape that the pulled hair takes, the pharaoh also holds a bow.³² This figure is known for example from the relief of Amenhotep II at Karnak, or even in the relief of Seti I on the chariot, in which Pharaoh brandishes with one hand the curved sword and holds with the other the reins and at the same time the bow.³³

The only pose that differs from the others is the one from Tell el Far'ah South No. 569, in which the hand of the Pharaoh who is about to strike the prisoner held by the hair, also holds what seems to be a staff.

The motif itself seems to be the origin of the pose of the so-called "menacing-god" Ba'al and/or Resheph,³⁴ with the difference that the god does not hit anyone, is often found on a pedestal and in front of him is a worshipper (or a priest) in the act of prayer or offering. The god, in some of these

³² Already suggested by Keel (2013) for Tell el Far'ah South No. 566.

³³ For other depictions see the article that inspired this interpretation, Lagarce-Othman (2021).

³⁴ Cornelius (1994: 255) after Collon (1972: 30). To mention on the subject is definitely Lipinski (2009).

representations, could be nothing more than the statue or the simulacrum venerated in places of worship.

The scene on Tell el-‘Ajjul (No. 1234) and Beth Shean (No. 23), as in the other depictions, takes place in the presence of the statue of the god, with the presence of a deity or with the deity intervening directly by handing the sword to the king.³⁵

The depicted god could be Amun, Horus, Set or Khnum; the god is shown standing and in the act of offering a sword to the king, a pose not found in statuary depictions.

In Tel Masos (No. 1) and Tell el Far‘ah South (Numbers 245 and 569?) an anthropoid figure on the back of the Pharaoh has been recognized as a worshipper (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 120).

With regard to the Pharaoh’s target, this is not ethnically characterized, except perhaps for the hint of a beard that recalls the representations of Asiatics visible in the seal of Tell el Far‘ah South (No. 652 and 859) and Tell Beit Mirsim (No. 11), but the target itself is always smaller than the Pharaoh itself.

Contrary to what can be seen in some wall reliefs, probably due to the small size of the engraving, the characters do not have any kind of characterising object, neither ornaments nor weapons.

The pose in which the enemies are depicted is kneeling, standing, or more rarely sitting, almost lying down (Beth Shean No. 47); they can be turned towards the Pharaoh or turn their backs, in this case with their hands tied behind their back (e.g. Tell el Far‘ah South No. 896). Where there are free hands in some cases (e.g. Beth Shean No. 47 and Tell Beit Mirsim), the prisoners raise their arms towards the Pharaoh in an act of asking for clemency (or protecting themselves?).

The setting in which the scene takes place is bare, the Pharaoh is standing on a nb sign or two horizontal lines interpreted as mrj. In the scarab from Tell el-‘Ajjul (No. 1234) the scene is acted on the royal epithet *nb ḥpš* ‘Lord of power.’

The hieroglyphic signs surrounding the Pharaoh are repeated in almost every exemplar. In Table 3 we can see a recurrence of these signs taken individually.

Specifically, *m3’t* figure and *m3’t* feather (*šwt*) appear on numerous examples, usually at the back of the Pharaoh; in Beth Shean No. 47 with *wsr* and *r’* in composing the throne name of Ramses II. The same throne name is possibly readable in Megiddo No. 40 in which the *m3’t* figure is highly schematized and the *r’* sign is not visible and Tell el Far‘ah South No. 652 in which the *m3’t* figure is smaller and inserted between the *wsr* and the back of the Pharaoh.

The same combination of *r’* and *wsr* is visible also in the Ashkelon item and in Deir el-Balah scarab. The *wsr* sign alone appears on Lachish No. 475, Megiddo No. 13 and Yavneh 2.

³⁵ For the sword as a symbol for the god-given power see Keel (1999).

The *m3't* feather (*šwt*) appears with two horizontal signs read by Keel as a double *nb t3wj*, a rudimentary spelling of the formula “Lord of the Lands;” same double line is visible on the item from Gat Karmel.

In Tel Masos scarab the *hpr* sign is accompanied by a small sign read *r*, *š* or *t* differently; the same *hpr* sign appear with a *wsr* sign on Tell Beit Mirsim scarab. The two combinations could point to the throne name of Seti II (*wsr- hprw-r'stp-n-r'*).

Other combinations of hieroglyphic signs are visible in Tell el Far'ah South in which a *nh* appear under a *z3* and Tell el Far'ah South in which the king is accompanied by the epithet *h'w nfr (w)*, with perfect appearances. In this last item the scene is acted under a winged sun disk.

The motif of the Pharaoh striking enemies, to be fully effective, needed some additional elements, as is visible in Table 3. Although the message conveyed is the same, monumental art and scarabs shared some features, while other are only present in one of these media.

Although it is not possible to give a definitive judgment, the variations present in the iconographic motif may depend on the pharaoh (different name inscribed), but also on the area of origin or consumption of the object itself (e.g. proximity of a specific deity dedicated sanctuary), as well as on the occasion in which the scarab was made.

Scarabs			Monumental Art
Common	Rare	Unique	
Blue Crown (<i>hprš</i>) with uraeus	Blue Crown (<i>hprš</i>)	Atef Crown	Blue crown (<i>hprš</i>) with or without uraeus, Red Crown (<i>dšrt</i>), double crown (<i>šhm.ty</i>), atef crown (rare)
Long ribbons at the shoulder high	Long ribbons from the Crown		Ribbons and tassels
Short skirt with tassels, short skirt (<i>šndwt</i>)	Long skirt, no skirt indicated		Short skirt with tassels (<i>šndwt</i>)
<i>hprš</i> sword	<i>hprš</i> sword and bow (?) or club		Club, <i>hprš</i> word, short spare (rare)
Enemy kneeling	Enemy standing or crouching	Enemy sitting	Enemy/es kneeling, laying (rare)

Enemy held by hairs	Enemy held by tied hands		Enemy/es held by hairs or raised arm
	Amun handing over the sword to the Pharaoh		Amun, Horus, Thot (rare) or Ptah in the <i>naos</i>
	Anthropomorphic figure with arm raised	Anthropomorphic figure behind the back of the Pharaoh	Anthropomorphic figure with arm raised (rare)
	<i>hpr</i> sign		
	<i>m3't</i> figure and <i>m3't</i> feather (<i>šwt</i>)		<i>m3't</i> figure and <i>m3't</i> feather (<i>šwt</i>)
		<i>‘nh</i> sign	<i>‘nh</i> sign/s
	<i>nb</i>		
	<i>Wsr</i>		Pharaoh’s name
		Winged sun disk (<i>bḥdtj</i>)	Winged sun disk (<i>bḥdtj</i>) (rare)
		<i>nfr</i>	

Table 3. Features of the “Pharaoh smiting” scene in both scarabs and monumental art

6. Distribution in the southern Levant

Canaanite city-states were exposed to the ongoing economic stress of land confiscation, population deportation, military raids, with a clear hierarchical inequality in benefits and economic advantages from one to another. The Egyptian domination, in this sense, cannot be considered “monolithic,” having modulated itself in different ways, that differently impacted on local culture, economy and society.

Different sites therefore had different functions, depending also on their geographical location: coastal sites served both as fortresses along the coastal route (e.g. Deir el Balah and Tell el-‘Ajjul) and as harbors for trade. Sites with an agricultural hinterland acted as collectors of foodstuffs and control of inland routes (e.g. Lachish and Tell el Far‘ah South; Streit 2019, Tucci 2022).

The territorial control was achieved by the Egyptians through the creation of functional “districts:” limited areas under a direct control, economic and productive zones of interest (Tucci 2016: 63).

In most cases, seals with the depiction of Pharaoh striking enemies appear at sites with a strong Egyptian presence in LB II-III.

These objects likely belonged to personnel involved in the Egyptian administration, if not directly from Egypt, perhaps acquired as a gift or as a handout. The contexts of discovery do not offer us much information about the owners of these seals, most of which come from funerary contexts, a small part from residential contexts of a certain prestige. Funerary contexts indeed show mixed assemblages of local culture and Egyptian-style objects, if not actually of Egyptian importation (e.g. Lachish, Tell el Far’ah South and Deir el-Balah).

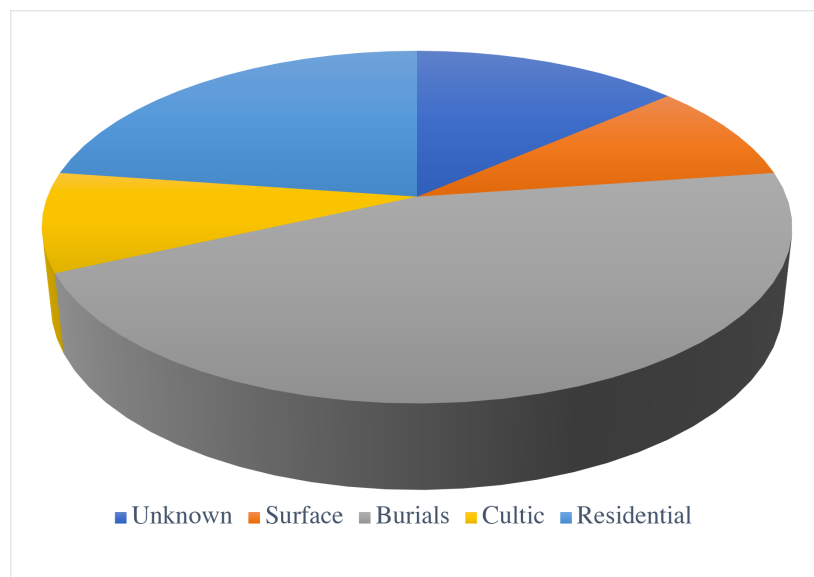


Fig. 6. Finding contexts of Southern Levantine scarabs with “Pharaoh smiting enemies” scene (by the author).

At Beth Shean, a site that during the Ramesside period became an Egyptian stronghold and likely an administrative center, the “smiting Pharaoh” scarabs were found in the area of the temple.

Shrines and temples of the Late Bronze Age are in this period multifunctional centers integrated into the social-cultural context and likely, in some case (e.g., Lachish), the became centers for the collection of taxes or tributes imposed by the Egyptian rulers (see e.g., Lachish; Tucci 2022); at the same time the level of mutual religious syncretism operating in the southern Levant should not be underestimated (Sala and Tucci 2019).

7. Discussion and conclusion

The scene engraved on some scarab seals from the Southern Levant directs the attention to what relationship could have existed between the iconographic repertoire and the monumental art.

The reproduction and copying of the image on small objects could be related to the artisans' knowledge and the use of the image itself (Washburn 2001: 69).

The typology and iconography of the artefacts produced to serve the propagation of ideology could have involved three individual and interrelated but distinct user groups, including royalty, priesthood and members of urban elite. Here we can quote Hegmon (1992: 528-529): 'The control of material goods and manipulation of ideology are often central to the definition of rank and the exercise of power in complex societies. The style of the material culture may be an important component of these power manipulation strategies. Elites often have exclusive access to certain kinds of goods, and elite status is reinforced by iconography. Analyses of style with respect to power relations must consider how people who are trying to gain or maintain power manipulate material culture.'

Assuming that such scarabs were therefore produced on the occasion of a particular event and distributed to officials and perhaps prestigious foreign dignitaries (even if the circumstances under which these scarabs reached the Southern Levant are still unknown), we have the solid comparison of the commemorative scarabs dated to the reign of Amenhotep III, a practice therefore not new to the Pharaonic world (Weinstein 1998: 235; and for a resumé of the scarabs found in Southern Levant see Sweeney 2003: 58 and Brandl, Bunimovitz and Lederman 2013). Even if assuming the perpetuation of a victory, and not just a punctual celebration, could the 'victory' still be traced back to a specific battle? Although it is not possible to trace the scene back to a specific historical event, is it possible to think that the production of the scarabs took place in connection with some particular event?

Unfortunately, as mentioned above, the contexts of discovery do not provide much basis for assessments other than preliminary.

In monumental demonstration the power of the Pharaoh was evident and drawn in vivid strokes. Apparently, there was no need to infiltrate more deeply into the cultural landscape subtly, as Egyptian objects and customs were already well known, and we can say, appreciated by the local population.

Did the propaganda mechanism work? Were the Southern Levantine truly convinced of Egyptian superiority? According to the thesis proposed at the beginning of this article by Freud: were the people of the Southern Levant identified with Egyptian power, idealizing and finding in it an identity refuge or shelter?

One of the most successful propaganda operations is undoubtedly that carried out by Ramses II with his reliefs of the Battle of Kadesh. The enemies, the Hittites, are depicted fleeing. This narration

should not be understood as the real end of the battle, for it could only be a fragment of it, which could actually be an avoided disaster on both sides.³⁶

As noted by Gubel (2016: 175) the message conveyed by the iconography is clear: “Obey the Egyptian crown or perish!” but in the same article he also pointed out that this kind of representation used and re-used by the Asiatics, allegedly the target of the punishment can be a translation of the moral values³⁷ respecting which one contributes to a civil life. Although well contextualized, this statement does not find my full agreement with the situation of the southern Levant at the end of the Late Bronze Age, which was experiencing a (albeit apparently peaceful) occupation. Is it not possible to recognize in the latter (i.e. the, albeit apparently, peaceful occupation)—and without denying the presence of what today we would call “pockets of resistance”—that conquest of the affective components of the masses, which is the primary purpose of any propaganda action? The question is legitimate, and may remain open.

Although in most cases the adaptation of the same subject to different media affects the resulting style, the depictions of the pharaoh striking his enemies do not seem to suffer from this bias.

In fact, the scene is reproduced almost in its entirety, with only a few missing or summarized features, on both large wall reliefs and small engravings.

Although the “semantic weight” (Roe 1995: 44) of these two media is not comparable, the question posed by Roe may be of interest in this case. Could the media itself be the message? Following this idea, is it possible to propose that the ability to manipulate huge architecture visible from afar, as well as very small objects visible only from very close up, was equal to an entry of the proposed message into every level of the social and cultural life of the recipients of the message itself?

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³⁶ We know historically and politically what the battle of Kadesh was, less do we know about its actual course and outcome. But almost certainly the likely end was a stalemate to preserve what could be saved after heavy losses on both sides. See e.g. de Bruyn (1989), Santosuosso (1996), Spalinger (2005: 209-234). The “Bulletin” or report of the battle is itself fully focused on Ramses II’s exploits. Caviller 2005 (87) defines the report as Wcelebrativo,” far from a precise chronological account of the events of the war.

³⁷ Gubel (2016: 176). Note an important detail in the depiction of the central medallion of the “Bernardini” bowl of Praeneste. The pharaoh in the hand that holds the enemies by the hair, also holds a bow, from here a further proof of what has been said for the “curious” representations of locks of hair arched on the heads of Asian prisoners on the seals.

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