The Ultimate Attire

Jewelry from a Canaanite Temple at Beth Shan

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Tell el-Husn, ancient Beth Shan, was the first site to be excavated by The University Museum in what is today Israel. During a tour through British Mandate Palestine in the spring of 1919, Museum Director George Byron Gordon and Clarence Fisher, Curator of the Egyptian Section, chose Beth Shan partly because of its marvelous setting (Figs. 2, 3) at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, where it merges with the Jordan Valley. Set in the midst of fertile fields and shallow ponds teeming with fish and birds, Beth Shan had a perennial supply of water provided by the Wadi Judah, the biblical Harod River. The site is nearly an artificial mound or "tell," which had been built up over many millennia, and excavation there would not be impeded by any modern structures. Another reason for choosing Beth Shan was that the main land route between Egypt and Mesopotamia, two major centers of ancient civilization, passed by Beth Shan, with roads branching off north and south to ancient Damascus and Amman.

The excavations, which continued yearly through 1933, yielded rich remains of the Islamic, Roman, and Greek periods from the upper four levels of the tell. The most dramatic and unexpected discoveries, however, were found in the succeeding four lower levels (V through VIII). Numerous artifacts, Egyptian in style, began to be uncovered. Beth Shan is 250 km from the borders of Egypt and very far inland, over 50 km from the coast. Yet, the sheer quantity of Egyptian finds from the site has never been equaled at any other site in the region, even from extensively excavated locations closer to Egypt, along the southeastern Mediterranean coast.

The high point of Egyptian activity at Beth Shan occurred during the 13th century B.C. The largest collection of glass and faience jewelry from Late Bronze Age Palestine thus far found came from Levels VII and VIII. This hoard, including more than 1500 beads and 300 pendants from necklaces, and 40 vessels, had been deposited under a stairway of an Egyptian temple. Scientific and stylistic analyses of this collection, as detailed below, provide a rare glimpse of cultural, religious, and craft interaction between two diverse peoples.

Two unique, complete monumental stelae of the New Kingdom Egyptian pharaoh Sety I and one of Ramesses II (Fig. 4) of the 19th Dynasty describe Egyptian activities in the area in the 13th century B.C., at the end of the Late Bronze Age. The Sety I stela, dedicated to the Egyptian high god Ra-Hamachris, gives a detailed accounting of the military defense of Beth Shan and Reheb against the nearby belligerent city-states of Pella and Hamath, and against groups of marauding 'spira'. This Egyptian word has been etymologically related to "Hebrew" by some scholars, who propose that the Israelite invasion is referred to here. Beth Shan is indeed described in the Bible as a stronghold of the Canaanites, the indigenous Semitic-speaking people, that was taken by the Israelites only with great difficulty; the bodies of Saul, first king of Israel, and of his three sons were hung from the walls of the town after the Israelite defeat at nearby Mount Gilboa (see Joshua 17:11, Judges 1:27, and 1 Samuel 31:10-12). But the etymology of 'spira' is debatable. Although the term could have included the early Hebrews, it is most likely a general appellation for any dispossessed people, who often took to banditry.

As part of the Egyptian expansion into western Asia in the 13th and 12th centuries B.C., Sety I converted the Canaanite city of Beth Shan into a military garrison, which was later refurbished by Ramesses II and the 20th Dynasty ruler Ramesses III. A strong defensive bastion, the so-called Migdol (Fig. 5), was constructed on the southwestern side of the tell, and a structure known as the Commandant's House was built to the north. The latter may have been the local residence of the Egyptian garrison commander. The residential sector to the southeast was built according to standard Egyptian plan, with central hall residences along a perpendicular grid of north-south streets.

Cult and Temple

The most prominent feature of the new town was a temple precinct near the center of the settlement, which was in use over a period of 200 years (Royer 1940). First constructed in Level VII during the reign of Sety I, the temple proper (Fig. 6) comprises a lotus-columned inner courtyard and a stairway leading up to a back altar room. It is almost identical to other shrines and chapels and sanctuaries at el-Amarna, the capital of the monolithic pharaoh Akhenaten, and to temples at the worker's village of Deir el-Medineh near the southern capital of Thebes (Peet and Woolley 1923, Breyer 1930, 1948).

Even though the Beth Shan temple was Egyptian in style, the artifacts recovered point to emerging Egyptian and Canaanite cultural traditions. Dedicator
stela of the principal Canaanite deities—Mekal, "the god, the lord of Beth Shan," and Amitt, the local equivalent of Ashtarte—combine Egyptian and Canaanite motifs (Rowe 1939). Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of foreign countries and the "Lady of Turquoise," also figure prominently in the cult, as did the Nabataean artifacts located in Egypt. In the Sinai, the copper mining area in the Wadi Arabah, and Serabit el-Khadem, the turquoise mining center in the Sinai (Rothenberg 1972, Petrie 1905). Hathor is shown on a "clapper" or wand (Fig. 7), made from a hippopotamus tusk, that was found in the inner courtyard of the Beth Shan temple. She appears full-faced and cow-eyed, wearing a spiralig wig, fillet crown, and multistrung collar or earring. The exact function of such wands is uncertain, but it is conjectured that a pair of them were draped by priests above their heads in a dance festival to Hathor (Davies and Gardiner 1915). Many other Egyptian artifacts were found in the temple, including pottery vessels described as "flower pots," and "beer bottles" that were possibly employed in a bread and beer ritual (Holtchzer 1977).

If the local Canaanite and resident Egyptians had no inherent difficulty in combining religious iconography and practice, then it would come as no surprise that their respective ceramic technologies might be merged together in various ways. For example, rather than importing Egyptian pottery vessels, more expediently made of local clays, very likely by Canaanite craftsmen under Egyptian tutelage (and compulsion). The same workshops probably also continued to produce a large quantity of standard Palestinian vessels, but quality suffered as heavily tempered, low-fired wares characteristic of New Kingdom Egypt became the norm.

Jewelry for the Gods

The impact of Egyptian stylistic and technological traditions on local Canaanite practice is especially evident in the large hoard of glass and faience objects. The sili
cate jewelry and vessels (Figs. 8, 9) were buried below or in the vicinity of the stairway of the temple, leading up to the back altar room. The practice of burying special objects as ex voto or foundation deposits under walls, floors, and under the steps leading up to the sanctuary was a common Canaanite and Egyptian practice (Cerny 1954). Some of the objects probably played a direct role in the cult. For example, chalices and jars with lotus motifs (see Fig. 9), which are very prevalent in the Beth Shan group, were used to present food offerings to deities in New Kingdom Egypt (Nagel 1938). The masses of beads and pendants (Fig. 8) had most likely been strung together originally to form pectoral or necklaces. Jewelry donations to the gods, who were now all under Egyptian suzerainty, consti
tuted a subtle form of Egyptian political control at Beth Shan.

The Egyptian pendant types found at Beth Shan fall into three categories: (1) mythologically sig
nificant fauna and flora (lotus, mandrake, cobra, and cat); (2) Egyptian deities, such as the hand
y-legged dwarf Bes, the god of merri
ment and dance; and (3) hieroglyp
ic signs representing important religious concepts—"life" (ankh), "stability" (dd), and "heart" (ib; Fig. 1). Pendants of Syro-Palest
tine type, including a ram's head (Fig. 10), seven-rayed star disk, and crescent with horns, were symbolic of Canaanite deities and religious ideas. Thus, beyond serving orna
tmental, economic, or political func
tions, the Beth Shan jewelry is religiously significant. It was the "ultimate attire," whose symbolic import enjoined divine favor and protection for both the gods and humans.

Since both Canaanite and Egyp
tian deities are depicted wearing necklaces (see Fig. 7), perhaps the jewelry from under the Beth Shan temple steps once adorned a cult statue of Aman-Ra. In Syria, the Qatna temple inventories for the moon goddess, Nickal, cata
cologue an incredibly rich collection of jewelry, including statues that beautified her cult statue. Other temples in northern Mesopotamia—Asur, Nuzi, Ala
baba—have yielded large jewelry collections, as have many sites in Palestine. Nonetheless, Beth Shan has produced an intact cult statue. Since such statues were probably made of wood or other organic material, very likely they have totally disintegrated.

A Merging of Egyptian and Canaanite Technological Traditions

The glass and faience industry at Beth Shan had its roots in the early Middle Bronze Age, when glass was invented. But the Egyptian presence in Syria-Palestine in the late 2nd millennium B.C. brought changes to the industry. Just as we have seen for pottery manufacture, the Egyptians probably controlled the silicate industry at its most basic level: the preparation and supply of raw materials. Specifi
cally, faience of standard New King
dom type became very prevalent during the period of Egyptian occupation at Beth Shan (see Van
diver 1983). Egyptian faience was fired at lower temperatures than...
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Egyptian-style vessels from the boat found under the Beth Shan temple stairway. Chemical analysis confirms that they were manufactured in Egypt and imported into Beth Shan. From left to right, a probable lotus chalice fragment (blue-green faience, longitudinally fluted, with petals delineated in lead antimonate yellow; and cobalt blue overglaze) a lot of blue-green glazed faience (with manganese-iron brown overglaze motifs of a lotus flower and lily pad); a restored glass amorpholith (with lead antimonate yellow and calcium antimonate white/edge design and toroid rim); and neck fragment of glass jug (with lead antimonate yellow wavy design and toroid rim and impressed handle of lead antimonate yellow, calcium antimonate white, and a grey deplated at metal). Silicate materials, as among the earliest mummade synthetics, were viewed as almost miraculous replications of naturally occurring minerals, metals, and other substances. They were often associated with specific deities—thus, blue-green glazed faience duplicated turquiose, the semi-precious stone virtually synonymous with Hathor.

Glossary of Silicate Terms

ceramic: an inorganic nonmetallic material, which has been fired to a high temperature, including pottery, refractories, abrasives, cements, glass, ferroelectrics, etc.

Egyptian Blue: a frit (see below) that is comprised of hexagonal, platey crystals of copper calcium silicate, which give the material its distinctive coloration, and silica. Although a solid silica is also a frit, the combined product described for Egyptian artifacts, it was made in many parts of the ancient Near East and northern Africa in the early period. The colorant was produced by heating (sintering) silica, limestone, and copper niter (by roasting solid crystals of copper sulfate) together. Small, flat circular cakes of the colorant were made and traded. The term "faience," technically, a misnomer. The word is usually reserved for a tin-glazed earthenware pottery from Faenza, Italy, but has come to have a quite different, well-established meaning in the archaeological literature, where it refers to a silicate material that has a sintered green, vitrified quartz body with a surface glass. The glazing was accomplished historically in one of three ways (1) by separately applying the glaze over the quartz body; (2) by mixing colorant and frit, or (3) by fusing oxides of silica and alkali (sodium and/or potassium) into a glass ("frit") and dispersing this glass into the surface during drying and forming a glaze upon firing; or (3) by embedding the quartz body in a solid mass of colorant and alkali—upon firing, metal ions from the solid migrate into the quartz and form a surface glaze (see Vandiver 1983: fig. 23).

frit: a polycrystalline material, including quartz as a major constituent, that generally lacks a surface glaze. According to modern scientific usage, frits are silicate materials that are prepared separately from a glass or glass batch mixture, and added to the latter. Egyptian Blue (above) exemplifies the ancient practice, which is quite comparable to modern processing.

glass: a totally vitrified, amorphous silicate material, which is composed of a random network of silicate chains with interspersed metal ions (alkalis, alkaline earths, and/or metal oxides). Although composed of the same basic constituents (silica, alkalis, and alkali earths) as ordinary glass, the higher relative percentage of alkalis in soda-lime glass enables the silica to fuse at lower temperatures.

silicate: any ceramic material—e.g., faience, glass, or frit—that has silica or quartz as its principal constituent.
Silicate production had all but ceased by the time the Egyptians withdrew from Beth Shan in the later Ramesside period (ca. 1100 B.C.). Yet, the local inhabitants maintained the outer form if not the substance of Egyptian tradition. The necropolis monuments of Sety I, Ramesses II, and Ramesses III were prominently displayed in the courtyard of a Canaanite temple in Level V for at least another century, when the site was finally taken by Israelites and reduced to an insignificant village.

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