



[31] Papyrus-shaped capitals

Beth Shean | Late Bronze Age IIB – Iron Age IA (13th–12th century BCE) | Chalk | H: 71.5–73 Max. dia: 128–138 Wt: ca. 400–550 kg | IAA | 1940-1348, 1940-1348/1

Between 1921 and 1933 an archaeological expedition from the University of Pennsylvania conducted wide-scale excavations at Tel Beth Shean. The excavators recovered remains dating from the Neolithic through the Early Islamic Period, but the most important discoveries by far were those from the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age – the time of the New Kingdom in Egypt, when Beth Shean served an Egyptian stronghold and administrative center for that part of the country. On the tell, the most important assemblage of

Egyptian monuments ever unearthed in Israel came to light (see nos. 29–30).

The capitals presented here are among the most impressive architectural elements from the Bronze Age ever found in Israel. They were fashioned from chalk, an easily carved stone, in the shape of a splaying papyrus flower. Chalk is readily available in the region, and thus there is no doubt that the capitals were produced in Beth Shean, probably by Egyptian artisans judging by the high quality of the workmanship. The same type of stone was also used for making the lintels and doorjambs bearing Egyptian inscriptions that were discovered at the site, the manufacture of which is clearly attributable to Egyptians, as only they would have been capable of carving the Egyptian hieroglyphs (see no. 30).

The upper and lower ends of the capitals are flat, and each end has a depression into which a pin of sorts could be inserted to connect the capital to a ceiling beam above and a column below. The better preserved capital still retains traces of white plaster in the lower depression, which, in turn, bears the impression of the wooden pin that joined the capital to the column. It appears that the capitals were mounted on wooden columns, for no stone column barrels have been found at Beth Shean, even though they were used for monumental construction in Egypt. The great weight of the capitals and the estimated height of the columns (see below) may suggest that the trees used were cedars, the largest and strongest trees in the region. Despite the fact that no traces of pigments have survived on the capitals,



one may assume that they were brilliantly painted, as were probably the wooden columns, perhaps with floral motifs related to the papyrus plant, as attested on columns in Egypt.

Unfortunately, the papyrus-shaped capitals were not found in the building to which they originally belonged. For reasons unknown, they were removed, along with other architectural elements, to the back of a temple excavated in the southern part of the site (where they were found lying upside-down, one next to the other). Though the original excavators attributed the capitals to this temple, renewed excavations at the site under the auspices of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1989–1996) have led to another conclusion: Since the size of the capitals do not conform to the size of the temple's column bases, they must

have come not from the temple, but from the large, imposing structure, called "Building 1500," the most impressive edifice unearthed at the site. Building 1500 is situated at the top of the tell, in its northwestern part. Its size, the quality of its construction, and the finds associated with it indicate beyond a doubt that it was the palace of the Egyptian governor of Beth Shean during the Iron Age IA (see no. 30). At the center of the building, surrounded by rooms, is a hall (ca. 8 x 9 m) in which two monumental column bases were discovered in situ. Each is 1.5 m in diameter and around 80 cm high. Though Building 1500 is approximately 50 meters away from the spot where the capitals were found, it is reasonable to assume that the capitals originated in its central hall and that they had

surmounted wooden columns erected on top of the impressive bases found there.

The plan of Building 1500 closely resembles those of buildings excavated in Tell el-Amarna and Deir el-Medina in Egypt. Its interior design, architectural elements, decorations, and commemorative inscriptions all follow the Egyptian tradition. However, a distinctly Canaanite practice, apparently employed in the Beth Shean vicinity, is notable in its construction: While in Egypt, buildings were constructed entirely of mud brick, Building 1500 was erected on top of stone foundations, upon which courses of mud bricks were laid. This feature shows the Egyptians' familiarity with, and willingness to adopt, influences from their Canaanite surroundings.

The capitals, which were found together, were separated during the British Mandate Period; one was sent to the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, where it lay well protected in a storeroom and was never exhibited, and the other was left on the tell and suffered significant damage over the years. The capitals were reunited for the present exhibition, thanks to the combined efforts of the Israel Museum, the Israel Antiquities Authority, and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority; and for the first time since their discovery ninety years ago, they have benefitted from intensive restoration, carried out by the Israel Museum Restoration Laboratories.

Papyrus-shaped capitals were very common in Egypt. While they are familiar to us from Middle Kingdom and early Eighteenth Dynasty wooden objects and artistic representations, the earliest actual papyrus-shaped capitals are only attested from the time of Tuthmosis III. Columns bearing papyrus-shaped capitals were chiefly used in hypostyle (multi-columned) halls and in small cult buildings (“kiosks”). In Egypt, the ratio between the column’s maximum diameter and its height was 1:5-1:7. The maximum diameter of the Beth Shean columns is unknown, but based upon the diameters of the lower parts of the capitals we may determine that their minimum diameter was around 40 cm. Since Egyptian columns widen toward their bottoms, the maximum diameter may be estimated at around 60 cm. It appears, therefore, that the height of the Beth Shean columns (including base, capital, and ceiling beam) was between 3 and 4.2 m. (This, then, would also have been the height of the central hall of Building 1500.)



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In contrast to Egypt, papyrus-shaped capitals were rare in Canaan. Apart from the examples from Beth Shean, only two fragments of such capitals have been excavated to date in Israel: one was found at Lachish and is attributed to the Acropolis Temple of the twelfth century BCE (see no. 45), and the other was found lying upside-down in the courtyard of the Canaanite palace of Stratum VIII at Megiddo, dated to the fourteenth century BCE. The papyrus-shaped capitals from the Egyptian administrative center at Beth Shean along with the fragments from the Canaanite city states Lachish and Megiddo attest to the adoption by Canaanites of the Egyptian custom of decorating public buildings, such as temples and palaces, with monumental capitals.

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References:

Arnold 2003, 52-57; James 1966, fig. 95:4; Mazar 2006, 74-76, photos 3.15-3.16; Mazar 2011; Rowe 1940, pls. XXVI:20; LIIA:4; Siegelmann 1976.

[32] Bowl fragments with administrative inscriptions

Tel Sera | New Kingdom, 20th Dynasty (12th century BCE) | Pottery | Dia of reconstructed bowl: 26.5 cm | IAA | 2015-1105

Fragments of four partially complete bowls bearing hieratic inscriptions on their exteriors were found in the last Late Bronze Age occupation level at Tel Sera. The archaeological evidence clearly indicates that the site was an Egyptian stronghold during the Ramesside Period; the inscriptions are dated based on paleographic and other grounds to the early Twentieth Dynasty, most probably to the reign of Ramesses III. Only a small part of the original inscriptions have survived, yet the remaining text indicates they record measured quantities of grain, which in one case were meant for a temple. One of the texts also records a date – regnal year 22, in all probability referring to the reign of Ramesses III. These inscriptions undoubtedly reflect Egyptian