



# BYBLOS

*A Legacy Unearthed*

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES (THE NETHERLANDS)  
& MINISTRY OF CULTURE/DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF ANTIQUITIES (LEBANON)**





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**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES (THE NETHERLANDS)**  
& **MINISTRY OF CULTURE/DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF ANTIQUITIES (LEBANON)**

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## **BYBLOS: THE TRANSITION BETWEEN THE LATE BRONZE AGE AND THE EARLY IRON AGE**

Marc Abou-Abdallah

The history of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages is one of the most tantalizing in Phoenician history, with far-reaching implications for an understanding of Byblos' history during this period. It is widely agreed that the political history of the Levantine city-states is intrinsically related to trade, since they are located on an overland trade route between Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as being hubs for maritime commerce. However, due to the lack of direct archaeological evidence from Byblos, it is somewhat difficult to reconstruct the history of this Lebanese coastal city unless one integrates it into the broader political, economic, and cultural context in which it existed: the Levant. Nevertheless, this brings us to a fundamental question: is there in Byblos, such as in many other Levantine city-states, continuity between the Bronze and Iron Ages, and to what extent?

### **The Late Bronze Age**

During the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (c. 2100-1600 BC and 1600-1200 BC respectively), the Levant was organized around competing city-states, ruled largely by governors or mayors, some of whom regarded themselves as hereditary 'princes', and with a much smaller number administered by councils of elders (Joffe 2002, 427). These were independent at various times, but otherwise under the control of the Egyptian New Kingdom empire, which, from the time of its establishment in c. 1500 BC, until its dissolution c. 1100 BC, increasingly assumed dominance of the Levant (Weinstein 1981). Egyptian New Kingdom sources appear to use the term 'Canaan' as both a generic geographic and ethnic designation for the Central and Southern Levant (Rainey 1996, 6).

Nevertheless, **the primary governing institution of the Levant was the palace** and, during the period between 2000 and 1500 BC, intimate connections were established by ruling elites around the Eastern Mediterranean. **Diplomatic and economic contacts created a strongly hierarchical world order that was maintained by carefully calibrated rhetoric, trade, gift exchanges, royal marriages, and warfare** (Joffe 2002, 427). Thanks to these political and social circumstances, the eastern part of the Mediterranean region had become the focus of intensive commercial, cultural and political interrelations between the states of Western Asia (the Mitanni and Hittite Empires), Egypt, Cyprus, Crete, and Minoan or Mycenaean Greece (Klengel 2000, 21). At this time, Mitanni, whose capital Washshukkanni was located in modern Tell Fekheriye



Figure 31.1: Levantine men bring monkeys and other tribute to the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II, c. 860 BC. This relief was at the entrance to the king's throne room in Kalhu. Photograph by LiviusOrg / Jona Lendering.

(Liverani 2014, 291), took advantage of geopolitical circumstances to extend its territory westwards (Bryce 2005, 116). In the late 15th century BC, a new *status quo* emerged with an established frontier that gave control of Kadesh, along with the coastal states of Amurru and Ugarit, to Egypt. All territory beyond in the Northern Levant was conceded to Mitanni. For the time being a treaty effectively ended any prospect of further Hittite intervention in the Levantine region (Bryce 2005, 145). Accordingly, trade flourished in the Near East, and all the coastal cities, including Byblos, established stable and active trade networks, as evidenced by finds at archaeological sites, and diplomatic correspondence such as the Amarna Letters in the 14th century BC. The coastal cities specialized in exporting sought after goods including olive oil, wine and wood, and importing foreign commodities – such as copper from Cyprus and fish, wheat and gems from Egypt – for local consumption or resale (Charaf 2020, 433-44). However, it should be noted that this longstanding and peaceful commercial intercourse was sometimes interrupted, particularly at the beginning of the 15th century BC. Disputes and open conflict occurred between Egypt and Mitanni (Bryce 1995, 116), the Amarna period in the 14th century became increasingly unsettled and insecure (Moran 1992), followed in the beginning of the 13th century, by disputes and open conflict between Egypt and the Hittite Empire (Grandet 2008, 165-230). As for Byblos, it was the premier Egyptian port-of-call in Lebanon for over a thousand years, spanning the Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Ages (Stieglitz 1990, 9), and the hub of a vast economic and political interregional network (Liverani 2014, 130, 236) that included some city-states of Western Asia, such as Ugarit, and the states of Egypt, Cyprus, Crete and Minoan or Mycenaean Greece. The wealth and the expanse of this trade are best illustrated through finds from shipwrecks off the coast of Turkey at Cape Geledoniyah and Uluburun. These ships preserve a snap-shot of Late Bronze Age trade, while simultaneously serving as examples of larger trends, such as the cargos and routes of ships during this period (Walton 2018, 417-18). The commercial activities of the network proliferated during this period and possibly reached Selinunte in Sicily (Falsone 1995, 677), as suggested by the Egyptianizing statue of a male deity, which could have originated from Byblos, and which is dated to between the 14th and the 12th centuries BC (Tusa 1973, 177).

Sometime at the end of the 12th century BC, the great commercial and political centres that comprised the Bronze Age commercial system in the Near East collapsed. This occurred around the same time as the crisis of the ‘Sea People’s’ invasions, a crisis which was symptomatic of societal breakdown across the

Mediterranean and Near East. Accordingly, the Mycenaean (some of whom almost certainly became ‘Sea People’s’ themselves) completely disappeared from the international political scene (Liverani 2014, 423) in the late 13th and early 12th centuries. Ugarit was totally destroyed around 1185 BC the local states and towns in the south-eastern part of the Hittite empire were also devastated between 1180 and 1070 BC, while its capital, Hattusa, was burnt to the ground. The Canaanite city-states in the Sharon plain, along the Carmel coast, and in the Akko and Jezreel valleys, also suffered total destruction at the end of the 12th century BC (Stern 2012, 506). Yet, based on archaeological evidence, the Sea People’s invasions did not impact Byblos in any substantial way (Liverani 2014, 387). This is *inter alia* due to the major defeat suffered by the Sea People at the hands of Ramses III (1187-1156 BC) in 1175 BC, close to the mouth of the Al-Kabir river (نهر الكبير) north of Byblos (Lipiński 2015, 4; Fig. 31.2). More broadly, Egypt had not been able to consolidate its position throughout the ancient Levant. Struggling since the days of Ramses III (1187-1156 BC) (Kahn 2012, 268), and during the reign of Ramses X (1108-1098 BC) (Brandt 1982, 371-405), it suffered from several political and economic challenges (Niwiński 1995, 330), including the ceaseless battle for power (Bonhême 1987, 26), and the raids of semi-nomadic populations into the southern region of the Levant and Palestine (Klengel 2000, 22). Subsequently, interregional commercial activities ceased, resulting in the Great Powers and their clients being unable to extract surpluses necessary for procurement of strategic materials (Joffe 2002, 430). These drastic changes mark the end of the Bronze Age period on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.

The upheavals of the 12th century BC thoroughly reconfigured Levantine societies socially, politically and economically. New patterns of international mobility included the appearance of migrants, not least, ‘Sea Peoples’, further destabilized areas of Cyprus and the Southern Levant (Stager 1995). The palace economies, which had been based upon tributes and other deliveries to the respective rulers and overlords, decreased (Klengel 2000, 23). More importantly, the development of iron metallurgy by the ‘sub-elites’, and the dissemination of utilitarian objects outside palatial control, contributed to the ‘subversion of the established order’ (Sherratt 1994). In addition, the commerce conducted by entrepreneurs increasingly bypassed the palaces and undermined their wealth and authority (Joffe 2002, 430), and it seems that at the beginning of the Iron Age the region was a magnet for entrepreneurs and artisans, seeking their fortunes (Gilboa et al. 2008, 190). Some continuity can be evidently observed during the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age transition, despite periods of





Figure 31.2: Drawing of wall relief at Medinet Habu depicting Ramses III defeating the Sea Peoples close to Byblos in 1175 BC. After Ippolito Rosellini 1832.

migration and severe disruption. The continuity of the Canaanite culture is noticeably attested in the regions of Manasseh and the Lower Galilee (Liverani 2008, 86), areas that were less affected by the destruction caused by the 'Sea Peoples' invasions. The Canaanite coast from Tyre to Arwad was largely spared (Gilboa 2005, 49-51), the primary sites being Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, Byblos and Arwad, each separated from one another by rivers flowing into the Mediterranean from the Lebanon Range. These Canaanite city-states did not collapse entirely at the end of the Late Bronze Age, but maintained social and institutional continuity across the putative boundary of 1200 BC (Joffe 2002, 432). Previously, the Lebanese coastal region had been part of the generalized province and concept of 'Canaan' but after 1200 BC an area of some 200 km, from Arwad on the Nahr el-Kebir in the north to the Plain of Akko in the south, was differentiated into 'Phoenicia' (Joffe 2002, 432). It is not surprising that a cultural and political identity such as 'Phoenicia' coalesced during this period, although this unity was cultural rather than political (Joffe 2002, 434). It is critical to note, however, that this area was divided in the 1st millennium BC into four independent kingdoms, Arwad, Byblos, Sidon and Tyre. These individual cities retained political autonomy under separate dynasties, possessed their own patron deities and were never united except in dire situations. Individual Phoenician dynasties called themselves by the name of their city, Sidonian, Tyrian, Byblian and so on. For all intents and purposes, these were simply extensions of Bronze Age concepts and practices. The very term 'Phoenician' is not applied by the cultural or historical tradition of the Levantine coast, but rather by outsiders, notably Greeks (Joffe 2002, 434).

From at least the early 11th to the mid-9th centuries, Byblos enjoyed relative stability as indicated by the *Tale of Wenamun*, the Assyrian annals and the royal Byblian inscriptions (Donner and Röllig 1973, KAI 1, 4-6; Abou-Abdallah 2018, 38-51). The stability that prevailed in Byblos was certainly due to interrelating geopolitical reasons. Byblos was not targeted by the campaign launched by Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC), since it aimed to punish exclusively the Arameans; it was also limited to the region of Arwad. Nonetheless, it seems that Byblos maintained cordial relations with the Assyrians during that period, and its king, Zakarbaal, might have been the one who paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser I (Elayi 2013, 117). Unlike the Middle Assyrians (Lafont et al. 2017, 593), Carchemish (Bachelot and Joannès 2001, 444-47) and Palistin, in the north west region of the Levant (Galil 2014a, 85), Byblos was not threatened by the Aramean expansion which took place between the 11th and the 9th centuries BC. Since Byblos was not in an underprivileged situation *vis-à-vis* the burgeoning

Phoenician Iron Age polities, it is reasonable to believe that it took advantage of these geopolitical circumstances (Fig. 31.1). Thus, with these considerations in mind, it seems logical that Byblos, under the reign of Zakarbaal, was free to expand its territory in its hinterland, as is indicated in the *Tale of Wenamun* (2: 14-24). Furthermore, this hinterland could have been a part of Amurru, which, during the second part of the 2nd millennium BC, was a (relatively) well defined geopolitical unit extending between the Orontes river and the central Levantine coast (Bryce 2005, 167). Therefore, it would be tenable to argue that Zakarbaal, who is mentioned in the *Tale of Wenamun*, could have been the same one who is mentioned in two arrowheads, in which he boasted that he is king of Amurru (Deutsch and Heltzer 1994, 12). Moreover, Byblos could take advantage of the Lebanese cedar resource in its hinterland, to develop its shipbuilding and maritime industry (Klengel 2000, 24). Accordingly, Byblos was able to resume its commercial activities.

Some recent archaeological excavations in Huelva, shed further light on Iron Age Byblos: ostraca with Phoenician inscriptions, are paleographically dated from the 11th to the 9th centuries BC (González de Canales, Pichardo and Llompart 2004, 133-35). Some of these inscriptions contain letters whose features are similar to Byblian inscriptions from the tenth and ninth centuries BC (González de Canales, Serrano and Llompart 2004, 133-35, pl. XXXV, LXI). The excavations of Huelva also revealed a large number of Phoenician amphorae that, according to <sup>14</sup>C dating (Nijboer and Van der Plicht 2006, 36), and compared to those from Tyre, can be easily dated to the 9th century BC (González de Canales, Pichardo and Llompart 2004, 179-84, 196-97). These discoveries are of particular interest, as they allow us to ask, albeit with caution, an important question: did the craftsmen of Byblos reach the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the 10th century BC? Were they independent of Tyre, or were they part of the Tyrian commercial expansion?

We can evidently conclude that, in contrast to other parts of the Southern Levant, and due to several overlapping reasons, Byblos underwent an autochthonous evolution, which led eventually to the establishment of a largely idiosyncratic socio-political organization. Byblos experienced a certain continuity between the Bronze and Iron Ages, and this can be corroborated by the resumption of trade affairs and the standardization of the so-called Phoenician alphabet, developed in Egypt by West Semitic-speaking people (Sader 2009, 152). Nevertheless, since the city of Byblos occupied a strategically important location near one of the main east-west routes, and due to beneficial geopolitical circumstances, this continuity allowed this Phoenician city to develop its own features during the 1st millennium BC.





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