

# Imported artefacts from an Early Bronze Age I burial ground at Nesher-Ramla Quarry (el-Khirbe). Two cases of interregional goods' transitions

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## *ABSTRACT*

Exotic objects between distant regions frequently constitute bases for interpreting them as evidence of direct interaction. This tendency is especially widespread in archaeological research of late prehistoric periods. Excavations of nine late Early Bronze I (EB I) burial caves at el-Khirbe in a modern quarry at Nesher-Ramla (NRQ = Nesher Ramla Quarry) has yielded various imported objects. Six are of Egyptian origin and a seventh is an extremely rare import from the Middle Euphrates Valley. The current paper presents these artifacts, proposes the manner in which they were likely imported and offers a broad interpretation of the phenomenon of including such objects as grave goods.

## *KEYWORDS*

Southern Levant, Dynasty 0 in Egypt, Early Bronze Age, Imports, Burial caves, Interregional Contacts



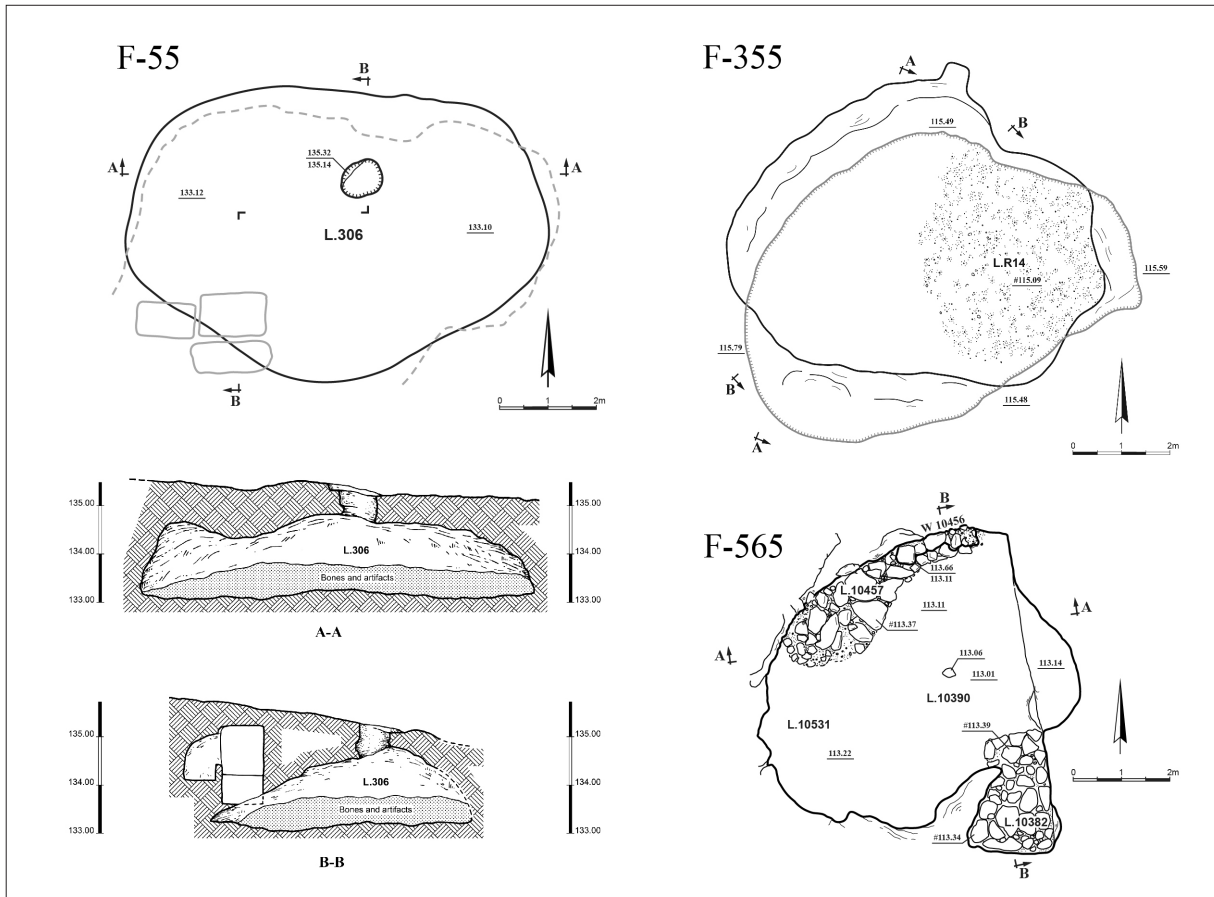


FIGURE 2  
Burial Caves F-55, F-355 and F-565

Four imported Egyptian ceramic vessels are associated with the late EB I burials; three small teardrop shaped bottles and an intact relatively small storage jar. The bottles were found in three different burial caves (F-355, F-565 and F-868). One of them, from Cave F-355, has a slightly elongated, globular body and a high cylindrical neck with a thickened, everted rim (fig. 4: 1). Its exterior surface is red-slipped. A second bottle from Cave F-565, differs in morphology, having a short neck with a rounded, slightly everted rim (fig. 4: 2). The third bottle from Cave F-868 has a globular body and short neck (fig. 4: 3). Below its simple rounded rim are two antithetic pinholes, which probably served for fixing a lid in place.

Petrographic examination of the vessels from Caves F-355 and F-565, revealed the fabrics of both

bottles are of alluvial Nile clays.<sup>9</sup> Their forms are very similar to Petrie's Sequence Type 87 a–d.<sup>10</sup> In the Nile Delta comparable vessels appear in Naqada IIIA/B contexts, e.g., at Tell Ibrahim el-Awad<sup>11</sup> and Tell el-Fara'in/Buto (level III).<sup>12</sup> In the southern Levant similar bottles are found at sites extending from northern Sinai to 'Ein Assawir on Israel's coastal plain, all of them from late EB I contexts.<sup>13</sup> Similar vessels imitating Egyptian forms and techniques were sometimes produced in the southern Levant from local clays, clearly imports copied lo-

<sup>9</sup> GOLDING-MEIR, ISIRLIS 2012, samples 75 and 117.

<sup>10</sup> PETRIE 1953, pl. XXV.

<sup>11</sup> VAN DEN BRINK 1992, fig. 7.2, pl. 18.2.

<sup>12</sup> KÖHLER 1992, fig. 7.

<sup>13</sup> AMIRAN, VAN DEN BRINK 2001, fig. 3.10.

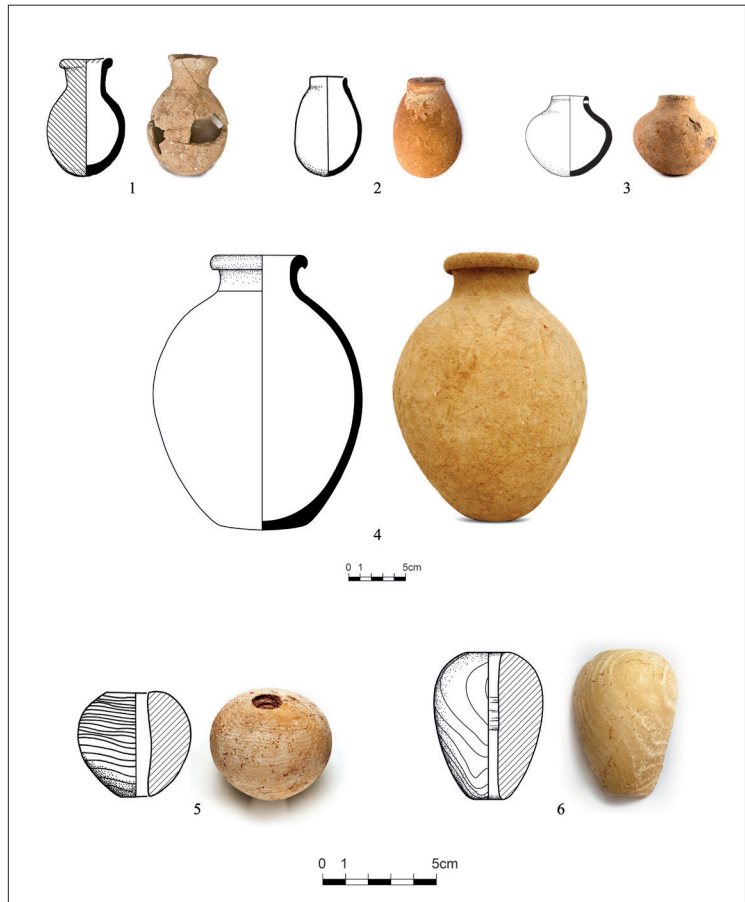


B



FIGURE 3  
Selection of finds from burial Caves F-55 (A) and F-662 (B)

FIGURE 4  
Imported Egyptian artifacts  
from the NRQ burial caves



cally and sometime known as Egyptianized.<sup>14</sup> Such vessels are restricted to southern sites, e.g., Site H Wady Ghazze (Nahal Besor) and 'En Besor.<sup>15</sup>

The morphology of the intact storage jar of this vessel is clearly Egyptian (fig. 4: 4), a fact corroborated by petrographic examination.<sup>16</sup> It was made of Egyptian marl clay, fired to a high temperature, and its exterior was left plain. This type of jar belongs to Petrie's Predynastic Group L53, in particular L53 h-j<sup>17</sup> and proto-dynastic Type 94, in particular 94d2 and 94k.<sup>18</sup> There are over 50 occurrences of this type of jar in Egypt: they offer a chronological framework that does not predate Naqada III. The majority of examples fall within Naqada IIIA2, al-

though later examples occur in Naqada IIIB-C.<sup>19</sup> Given its present context, attributing the NRQ jar to Naqada IIIB-C seems most likely.

Two pear-shaped alabaster mace-heads, found in the NRQ burial caves F-565 and F-868, show high levels of craftsmanship (fig. 4: 5-6). The alabaster appears to be of Egyptian origin but it is unknown where the objects were manufactured. Similar mace-heads are frequently recorded from the Naqada III period in Egypt but appear less frequently in the southern Levant during the Early Bronze Age. Examples are known from Jericho<sup>20</sup> and Horvat 'Il-lin Tahtit.<sup>21</sup> Production of alabaster items was very characteristic of early Egypt<sup>22</sup> and the export of such

<sup>14</sup> BRAUN 2016.

<sup>15</sup> GOPHNA 1992, figs. 4.7, 6.4.

<sup>16</sup> TSATSKIN 2010, pp. 55-56, fig. 4.25.

<sup>17</sup> PETRIE 1921, pl. L.

<sup>18</sup> PETRIE 1953, pl. XXIX.

<sup>19</sup> AVRUTIS 2012, 117-118, tab. 4.2.1 and references THEREIN.

<sup>20</sup> KENYON 1960, fig. 66.4.

<sup>21</sup> BRAUN ET AL. 2002, fig. 4.7.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. EL-KHOULI 1978; VAN DEN BRINK, BRAUN 2006.

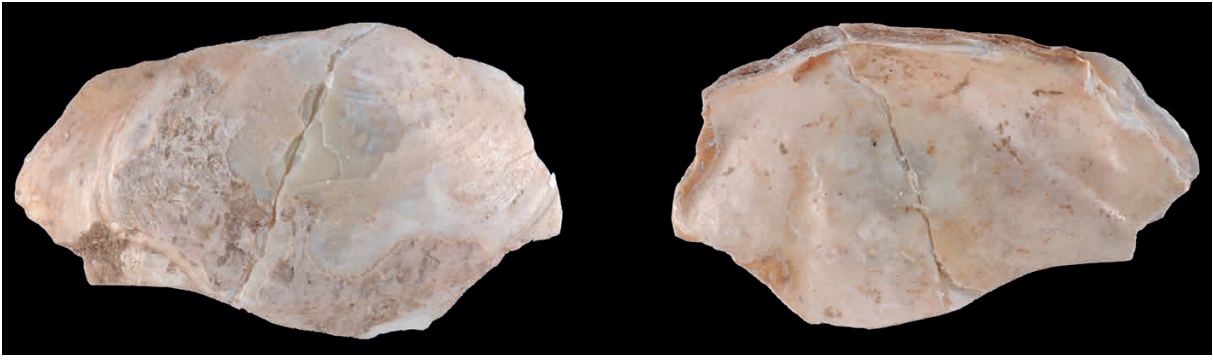


FIGURE 5  
*Chambardia rubens arcuata* shell from burial Cave F-565

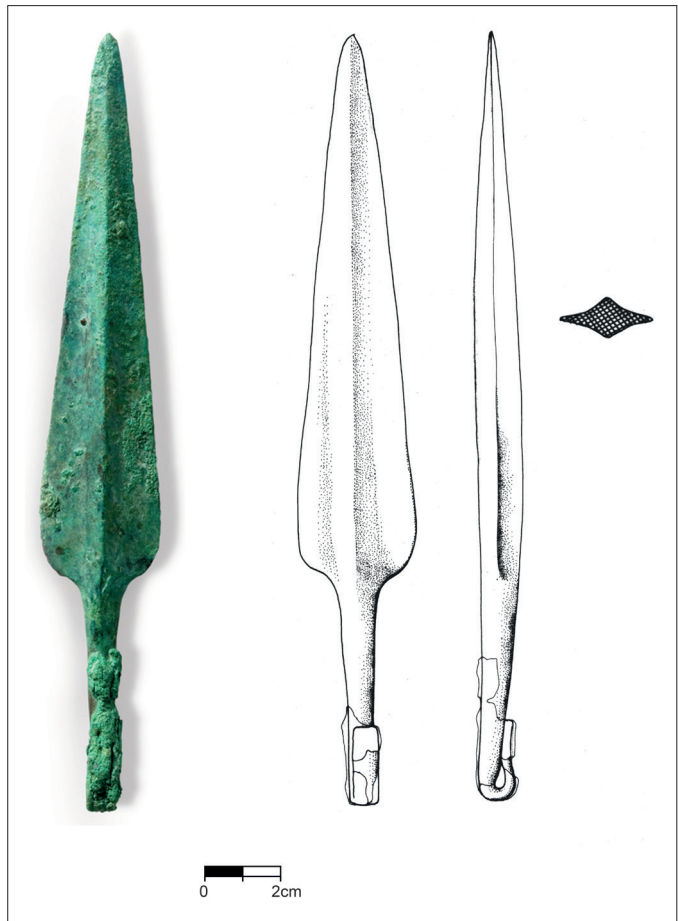


FIGURE 6  
A copper spearhead from burial Cave F-55

products to the southern Levant has been recorded.<sup>23</sup> These artifacts were either manufactured in Egypt or the raw material was imported and fashioned in the southern Levant.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. AMIRAN 1970 (alabaster vessels found in EB III temple at 'Ai, which probably originated in earlier, EB I, period).

Shells of the fresh water bivalve species *Chambardia rubens arcuata*, obvious imports from the Nile, were found in EB I contexts in Caves F-355 and F-565 at NRQ (fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> These shells have also

<sup>24</sup> MIENIS 2012, pp. 252–254, fig. 12.1.10.

been collected from Late Chalcolithic (LC) contexts at the site (e.g., Cave F-477), as well as from numerous other sites in the southern Levant. The presence of these Nilotic freshwater bivalves with their mother of pearl shells in the LC and EB I contexts is not surprising because they are highly diagnostic for those periods, although they were exploited at least from the Natufian until the Arabic periods.<sup>25</sup> The *Chambardia* shells collected from NRQ caves do not exhibit any signs of man-made modifications, i.e., there is no indication that they were exploited in one way or another beyond being used as grave goods.

This observation applies to most of the shells found in excavations throughout the Levant. In Egypt such mussels were used for numerous purposes such as scoops and for production of containers, combs, scrapers, discs and pendants. Their inclusion in the burials of the Late Chalcolithic and EB I in the southern Levant suggests they may have had some symbolic value. The export of *Chambardia* shells from Egypt, probably as live specimens are corroborated by the discovery of a late Predynastic Egyptian jar, of Ma'adi type (LC/EB transition or very early EB I) off the coast of the North Atlit bay, which contained pairs of these bivalves,<sup>26</sup> which were probably valued for their gastronomic qualities.

Interaction between the distant regions can be manifested not only by the transfer of objects, but also by adoption of foreign customs, concepts and traditions. On particularly good noteworthy of such an occurrence in the Ramla necropolis in Cave F-257 is a burial of a young child in tandem with a canine. The five to nine year old human individual<sup>27</sup> had been intentionally interred with a young dog (*canis familiaris*) of six to seven months.<sup>28</sup> The burial was sealed with a circular stone slab of local limestone.<sup>29</sup>

The earliest evidence of a canine burial in the Southern Levant is recorded for the Natufian period.<sup>30</sup> This unusual double burial is apparently the

earliest example of such in the southern Levant, as too date, there are no published examples of dogs that have been intentionally interred together with humans.

Intentional canine burials unrelated to human burials are known from the LC site of Gilat, where dogs have been deposited in shallow pits, dug into the ground. In few instances these were accompanied by pottery. Occasionally several dogs were buried in a single pit.<sup>31</sup> One explanation for this phenomenon is that the dogs played a ceremonial or totemic role in that society.<sup>32</sup> Dog burials have also been recorded for an early phase of the EB I settlement excavated at Ashqelon-Afridar,<sup>33</sup> and in an EB I-II pit at Tel Lachish.<sup>34</sup> This practice remains rare in the archaeological record of the country until the Iron Age II and Persian periods, which are beyond the scope of the present discussion. None of the above-mentioned examples were associated with human burials.

Unlike the situation in the southern Levant, numerous examples of human individuals buried together with canines are recorded for the Predynastic and later periods in Upper Egypt and Nubia.<sup>35</sup> There independent canine burials, with one or more dogs in single pit, were frequently found surrounded by concentrations of human burials. These dog burials were interpreted as being those of guardians.<sup>36</sup> One might perhaps hypothesize that the before-mentioned infant-canine burial in burial F-257 is perhaps a manifestation of a mortuary practice 'imported' from Egypt.

So far, this paper has presented artifacts and ideas imported from Egypt and their impact on the material culture of the southern Levant. Below it addresses several examples, of influences which flowed in the opposite direction, reflected by objects associated with the EB I NRQ burials.

<sup>25</sup> REESE, MIENIS, WOODWARD 1986.

<sup>26</sup> SHARVIT, GALILI 2002, p. 29\*, figs. 43–44.

<sup>27</sup> DEUTSCH 2012, p. 234, tab. 10.2.

<sup>28</sup> HORWITZ 2012, pp. 242–243, fig. 11.4.

<sup>29</sup> AVRUTIS 2012, p. 25, fig. 2.28.

<sup>30</sup> TCHERNOV, VALLA 1997.

<sup>31</sup> LEVY, ALON 1993, pp. 83–84, fig. 107.

<sup>32</sup> GRIGSON 2006, p. 239.

<sup>33</sup> GOLANI 2004, p. 14; WHITCHER KANSA 2004, pp. 291–292.

<sup>34</sup> TUFNELL 1958, pp. 288–290, pl. 7, 2; BATE 1958, pp. 322–323.

<sup>35</sup> See E.g., CHAIX 1999; FLORES 2003; VAN NEER, LINSELE, FRIEDMAN 2004.

<sup>36</sup> FLORES 2003, p. 65.

A locally-made, double-handled jug found in NRQ burial cave F-55, may serve as an example of the southern Levantine influence on foreign pottery traditions. The jug has two handles: a large, high and single-stranded loop handle attached to the rim of the cylindrical neck and shoulder, and an opposite, smaller, and near vestigial loop handle placed on the shoulder.<sup>37</sup> Similar jugs, though slightly less elongated and more globular, are known from burial caves in Palmahim Quarry and Azor, dated to a post-Erani C phase of the EB I period.<sup>38</sup> A miniature version of a similar jug was recovered at 'Ai.<sup>39</sup> Notably similar jugs have been found in contemporary Naqada III funerary contexts in Hierakonpolis, Upper Egypt<sup>40</sup> and in Terminal A-group elite tombs in Qustul, Lower Nubia,<sup>41</sup> where they were imitated in much finer fabrics. The appearance of these jugs in so distant regions suggests local imitations of the southern Levantine imports.

The late EB I burials found to date at NRQ were accompanied by fifteen daggers and a single spearhead, all of them of copper. The daggers are of the most common type, characterized by elongated blades, a rhombic or elliptical cross-section and rectangular butts with four or six circular perforations arranged in pairs which once had rivets. This dagger type, introduced during late phases of EB I, remained in use up to and including the EB IV period.

The spearhead deserves special mention (fig. 6). It is a 239 mm long and heavy (159.7 g) copper artefact of excellent workmanship. The blade is triangular with curved shoulders and is reinforced by a pronounced midrib that extends from tip to base. The massive tang is round in cross-section and ends in a hook. The blade is almost twice as long as the tang. Heavy hammering is evident on both its surfaces. Four similar spearheads have been found in the contemporaneous Kefar Monash Hoard<sup>42</sup>

and a single in Bat Yam.<sup>43</sup> Daggers sharing similar characteristics have been uncovered at and Kefar Monash (n = 4),<sup>44</sup> Jericho,<sup>45</sup> Tel Aviv (Ha-Masger Street)<sup>46</sup> and Horvat Mazarot (Nahal Tavor) (n = 2).<sup>47</sup> They differ from the spearheads in having a riveted hilt hafting but display the same local metallurgical tradition.

In Egypt, four nearly contemporaneous daggers with triangular shaped blades and pronounced midribs have been recorded. Two were recovered at el-Amra, one is of silver and the other of copper. The third, also of silver, was purchased by the Cairo Museum, having apparently been looted from a grave at Homra Doum. The fourth dagger, of copper, was recovered at Naqada.<sup>48</sup> The earlier appearance and the greater number of such daggers in the southern Levant lead us to assume that the Egyptian specimens are either imports or local imitations made of imported copper from the southern Levant. The latter assumption is especially valid for the two silver daggers, as there are no silver deposits known in the southern Levant.

The artifacts from NRQ join to the corpus of evidence of the interrelations and mutual influences between the southern Levant and Egypt during late EB I/Naqada IIIB–C. The contacts and influences described above illustrate several levels of the interregional interaction: the import of artifacts, the import of raw material for local production, local imitation of foreign artifacts, adaptation of foreign ideas and traditions.

The Egyptian artifacts from NRQ, as well as the main corpus of Egyptian material recovered from sites in the southern Levant, are dated to the late EB I, parallel in time with Naqada IIIB–C, the period during which the last kings of Dynasty 0, (Horus) Ka and (Horus) Narmer reigned and early rulers of Dynasty 1, (Horus) Aha and possibly the early years of the reign of Djer.<sup>49</sup> Based on the quan-

<sup>37</sup> AVRUTIS 2012, pp. 109–110, fig. 4.17, pl. 4.22.3.

<sup>38</sup> GOPHNA, VAN DEN BRINK 2002.

<sup>39</sup> CALLAWAY 1964, pl. XIX.5091.

<sup>40</sup> ADAMS, FRIEDMAN 1992, p. 334, fig. 15.

<sup>41</sup> WILLIAMS 1986, pp. 78–80, fig. 182, pl. 25.

<sup>42</sup> HESTRIN, TADMOR 1963, pp. 279–282, figs. 10.3; 11.1–3; pl. 29.A–D.

<sup>43</sup> SHALEV 1992, p. 133, tabs. 3-A.3.A.8; 3-B.2.A.1.

<sup>44</sup> HESTRIN, TADMOR 1963, fig. 12.1–4, pl. 29. E–H.

<sup>45</sup> PHILIP 1989, p. 454, fig. 34.823 (right), pl. 2.A.

<sup>46</sup> BARKAN, ABU-SALAH 2017, fig. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Rotem personal communication.

<sup>48</sup> BAUMGARTEL 1960, pl. II.1–3, 5.

<sup>49</sup> BRAUN 2014, p. 40.

tity of imported material in the southern Levant and Egypt, it seems that contacts between the two regions peaked during that period.

In the EB I period there is ample evidence of interaction between the Southern Levant and Early Dynastic Egypt.<sup>50</sup> Towards the end of the late EB I period interaction becomes more and more intense.<sup>51</sup> The earliest interpretations of the evidence for this intensified interaction were expressed in terms of a military conquest of the Southern Levant (and even farther north) by Egypt.<sup>52</sup> With the accumulation of new excavation data, the nature of the interaction was reviewed, and trade, rather than military aggression, was emphasized.<sup>53</sup> The process was defined as colonization of the southern part of the Southern Levant.<sup>54</sup> Newer approaches offer more dynamic interpretations of the evidence.<sup>55</sup> Notably, this interaction abruptly ceased at the very end of EB I.

A “four-tiered” model, based on the analysis of large quantities of the Egyptian-associated material derived from various sites, was proposed to illustrate the degree of interaction during very late EB I.<sup>56</sup> According to Braun’s and Van den Brink’s model, Tier 1 is ascribed to sites with primarily Egyptian-associated material culture, probably reflecting immigration from the Nile Valley. These sites are located in a limited area in the southeastern Mediterranean Littoral and the northern extremity of the Negev and, in most cases, had previously been settled by indigenous populations. It seems that there was a kind of hierarchy in the Egyptian settlements consisting of a political center, administrative outposts, way-stations, and points of contacts with local populations.<sup>57</sup> To Tier 2 belong sites with significant quantities of Egyptian-associated material, perhaps <... suggest[ing] they may have, in addition to their

local inhabitants, harbored Nilotic populations as either frequent visitors or long-term residents».<sup>58</sup> Sites of Tiers 3 and 4 are characterized by exclusively indigenous populations, as is evidenced by only sporadic Egyptian-associated artifacts (Tier 3) or a total absence of them (Tier 4).

The small quantity of imported Egyptian artifacts from four of the eight burial caves excavated at NRQ are contrasted with many more objects south Levantine origin. The mode of burial (with the exception of the young child and canine), is typical of south Levantine mortuary practices and thus, the totality of the evidence points to this necropolis as serving a local population. The Egyptian imports, likely objects of prestige, are evidence of the relative wealth of the population and its willingness to devote significant resources for the benefit of its dead. They also suggest the possibility of contacts with Egyptians, both direct (e.g., the child-canine burial) and indirect (imported goods).

The centrally organized interregional interrelations must exhibit a material evidence of some kind of administration. Numerous *serekhs* of the last kings of Dynasty 0 and the first three kings of the First Dynasty have been found on the sites in the southern Levant.<sup>59</sup> The largest number belong to the period of the reign of (Horus) Narmer and mark the zenith of the interaction between the two regions. Most of the *serekhs* appear on jars of Egyptian origin and only two have been found on locally-made vessels, both of which exhibit Egyptian morphological characteristics. These containers, bearing royal insignia and names, suggest that the contacts had received royal sanction, even if they were not actually initiated directly by the Egyptian state. In addition, the internal administration of the period by Egyptians is evidenced by Egyptian-style bullae, found at En Besor and the Halif Terrace/Nahal Tillah site.<sup>60</sup>

The primary reason for establishing these relations seems to have been economic. The contemporary archaeological data are supported by later evidence, e.g., the early Middle Kingdom frescoes

<sup>50</sup> E.g. VAN DEN BRINK, LEVY (eds.) 2002.

<sup>51</sup> DE MIROSCHEJJI 2002, pp. 39–44, tab. 2.1; BRAUN 2011.

<sup>52</sup> YADIN 1955; YEIVIN 1960, 1968; OREN 1973.

<sup>53</sup> AMIRAN 1974; BEN-TOR 1982; GOPHNA 1987, 1992.

<sup>54</sup> BRANDL 1992; GOPHNA 1992.

<sup>55</sup> LEVY, VAN DEN BRINK 2002; DE MIROSCHEJJI 2002; BRAUN, VAN DEN BRINK 2008; ANĐELKOVIĆ 2012; BRAUN 2014.

<sup>56</sup> BRAUN 2014, pp. 37–43, fig. 1.

<sup>57</sup> GREENBERG, PALUMBI 2014, p. 117.

<sup>58</sup> BRAUN 2014, p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> LEVY ET AL. 2001, esp. 430–437, figs. 22.13–22.15.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. SCHULMAN 1976, 1980; LEVY ET AL. 1997.

from Beni Hasan,<sup>61</sup> which illustrate the various south Levantine commodities traditionally imported into the Nile Valley: wine, pulses, olive oil, resins, wood, cattle and caprines, copper, and human labor. In return, Egypt may have exported grain, Nilotic shells, gold, and semi-precious stones to the southern Levant.<sup>62</sup>

The overland trade routes between the Nile Delta and southern Levant have been established through the survey in the northern Sinai Peninsula.<sup>63</sup> Using data from sites such as Nizzanim, Palmahim Quarry, Palmahim, Ashqelon (Afridar and Barnea), Ma'abarot and North Atlit bay,<sup>64</sup> a part of a network of coastal way-stations on the maritime route from Egypt to Lebanon can be reconstructed.<sup>65</sup> The Egyptian artefacts at contemporary Byblos provide further evidence for this maritime route.<sup>66</sup>

The end in Egyptian/southern Levantine interactions occurs in very late (terminal) EB I or early EB II, during the reign of Den, the third king of the First Dynasty. At this time imported artefacts disappear from the southern Levant, as does other evidence of an Egyptian presence. The reasons for the waning of Egyptian influence during this period is not clear and a number of explanations have been suggested. The most widespread opinion is that the main factor for the change was the development of the sea route between the Egypt and the Lebanese coast. This route seems to have been much quicker, less expensive and safer and also gave a direct access to the source of the important and valuable commodity of timber.<sup>67</sup> In any case, the end of the massive Egyptian involvement was sudden and complete, which could be interpreted as an act of political will.<sup>68</sup>

These radical changes also occurred in the urban southern Levant and are clearly evident at the NRQ burial grounds which, after having been in use for several generations, did not continue into the EB II.

In complete contrast to the interrelations between Egypt and the southern Levant during the EB I, are the state of the contacts with the northern regions, such as northern Syria and Anatolia. Until recently the only imported vessel from the Euphrates Valley was found at the 'Ein Assawir, Tomb 20.<sup>69</sup> A new jar of similar origin was uncovered in the NRQ burial grounds.

The spouted jar found in Cave F-662 characterized by a globular body, high neck and an everted, thickened rim (figs. 7: 8.1), morphological characteristics clearly foreign to late EB I south Levantine ceramics. The jar is finished with oblique burnishing on its upper the body and with horizontal burnishing below. The spout is set on the vessel's shoulder. The neck and spout were made as separate segments and attached to the body while the vessel was in a 'leather-hard' condition. Petrographic examination of the jar confirmed its origin in the Euphrates Valley.

Spouted and un-spouted globular jars are very characteristic of the Mesopotamian ceramic repertoire. Parallels for the Neshar-Ramla jar have been recorded at Tepe Gawra (fig. 8: 2, 8),<sup>70</sup> Mohammed 'Arab (fig. 8: 3),<sup>71</sup> Tell Braq (fig. 8: 9)<sup>72</sup> and Khafajah (fig. 8: 4).<sup>73</sup> In addition this vessel can be related typologically to Late Reserve Slip Ware, although it differs in its surface finish (e.g., fig. 8: 5–7).<sup>74</sup> This group is well known in the Euphrates and Amuq valleys.<sup>75</sup> The majority of these vessels are dated to ARCANÉ<sup>76</sup> Period Early Middle Euphrates 1–2, corresponding with south Levantine EB IA to early phases of EB II.

<sup>61</sup> NEWBERRY 1896, pl. XXXI.

<sup>62</sup> BEN-TOR 1982, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> OREN 1973.

<sup>64</sup> As mentioned above, the North Atlit Bay jar dated very early in the EB I. Nevertheless, it still should be considered as additional evidence of the Maritime Route Way.

<sup>65</sup> GOPHNA, LIPHSCHITZ 1996.

<sup>66</sup> PRAG 1986.

<sup>67</sup> For a summary of the views on this topic, see SOWADA 2009, pp. 28–30.

<sup>68</sup> GREENBERG, PALUMBI 2014, p. 117.

<sup>69</sup> YANNAI, BRAUN 2001, fig. 3.6.

<sup>70</sup> SPEISER 1935, pp. 47–48, Pls. LXV.63; LXVI.80.

<sup>71</sup> ROVA 2013, p. 7, pl. 2.1.

<sup>72</sup> FELLI 2003, p. 67, figs. 4.16, 4.25.20.

<sup>73</sup> DELOUGAZ 1952, pl. 187.C.655.222.

<sup>74</sup> BRAIDWOOD, BRAIDWOOD 1960, fig. 219.1, 3; FRANGIPANE 2007, fig. 8.17.13.

<sup>75</sup> JAMIESON 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Associated Regional Chronologies for the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

FIGURE 7  
Middle Euphrates spouted jar  
from burial Cave 662

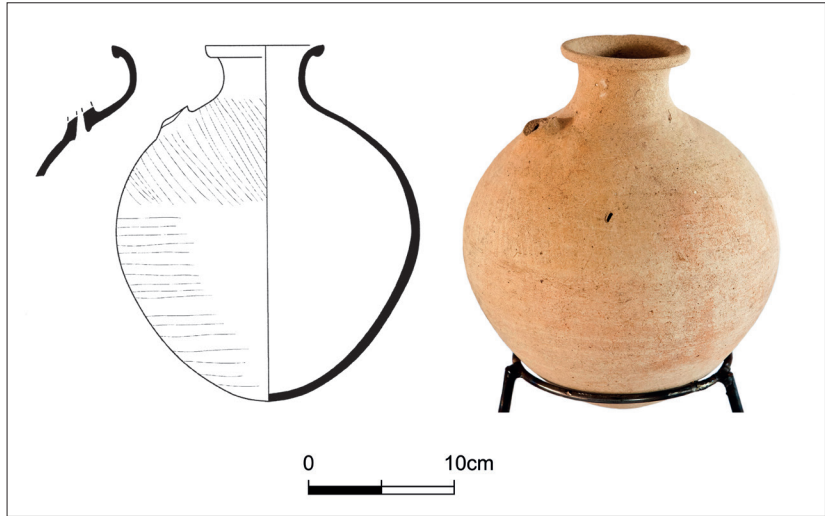
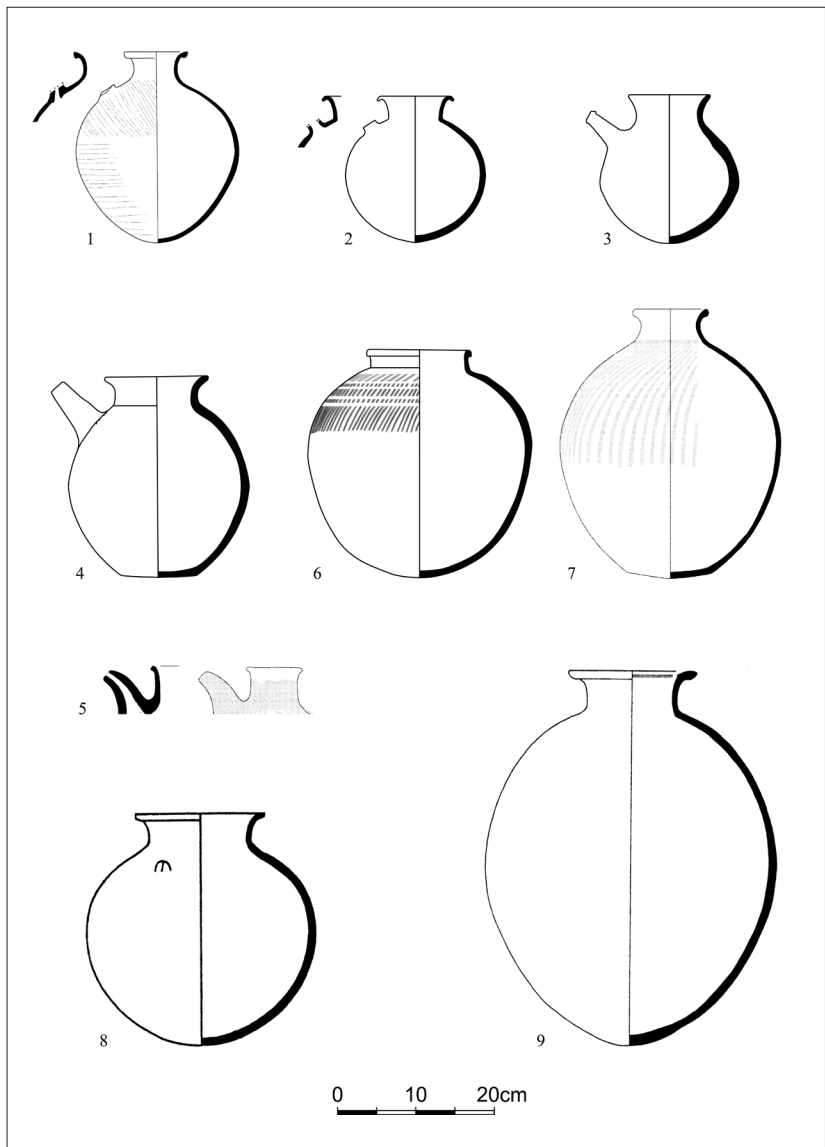


FIGURE 8  
Selected parallels for the spouted  
jar from NRQ



The presence of only two vessels imported from the north in the whole area of the southern Levant emphasizes the almost-complete absence of any direct connections with northern Syria and Anatolia during the course of the EB I period.

Trade between the southern Levant and neighboring regions discussed in this article may have been on an equal or unequal basis and may have

been either direct or indirect. However, it should be remembered that foreign artefacts could have reached the various sites discussed above through non-commercial relationships which might have included tribute, plunder, gifts, etc. Thus, the presence of the imports, *per se*, as is apparently the case for NRQ, does not necessarily indicate direct inter-regional contacts.

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