



# 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 AND THE EARLY EGYPTIAN STATE

Karin Sowada

The Egyptian relationship with Byblos (ancient *keben*) has a long history spanning over three millennia.<sup>1</sup> The connection was one of deep symbiosis originally grounded in the raw materials required by Egyptian elites, procured within reach of a port on the Lebanese coast. From embryonic beginnings in the Chalcolithic period, the relationship accelerated under the nascent Egyptian state of the Early Bronze Age. By c. 3100 BC, the first Egyptian kings emerged. Over four hundred years later around 2660 BC, the earliest stone pyramid rose from the desert sands of Saqqara, ushering the 'Pyramid Age' of the Old Kingdom (c. 2686-2181 BC).

Foreign connections were fundamental to the rise of Egyptian kingship ideologies, the emergence of the territorial state, and expressions of royal power. Byblos became Egypt's key east Mediterranean focus. Interactions and cultural influences developed over the course of the 3rd millennium to the point that Byblos assumed a religious significance for the Egyptians. The relationship had profound cultural and economic influence on Byblos, in addition to delivering status and prestige in competitive local peer-polity interactions with other urban centres. For the people of Byblos, the relationship with Egypt provided a stable economic base for much of the 3rd millennium, enabling maintenance of its position as a regional entrepôt until the interregional collapse of c. 2200 BC.

### Egypt and Byblos in the 4th millennium BC

From an early time, somewhere in the mid to late 4th millennium BC of the Levantine Early Bronze Age (c. 3400 BC), archaeological evidence indicates that Egyptian connections with the Lebanese coast emerged. Silver, lapis lazuli and other exotica appear in Egyptian graves, attesting to long-range commodity exchange. The mechanism is opaque, but for lapis lazuli this must have involved extensive overland and river travel through Mesopotamia to the Levantine coast.

Yet there is an even earlier phase: similarities in the Chalcolithic material culture of the late 5th and early 4th millennium BC between Egypt, Byblos and the Southern Levant have long been noted by scholars as evidence of interaction and the interregional movement of ideas (Kantor 1942; Chéhab 1950; Prag 1986; see Chapters 7-8). To this can be added the use of resin from coniferous pine trees in early Egyptian mummification c. 4400-3700 BC, far earlier than previously assumed (Jones et al. 2014). Conifer species of cedar, pine and

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1 Funding for this paper was provided by Australian Research Council Project Grant FT170100288 'Pyramids, power and the dynamics of states in crisis' awarded to the author.



Figure 12.1: Fragment of a travertine jar from the Baalat Gebal Temple. The outstretched wing of a deity is carved onto the surface; the fragmentary text reads left to right '[king of Upper and] Lower Egypt, Son of Re, Un[as]', 5th Dynasty, date of reign c. 2375-2345 BC, scale 1:1. DGA 128405 © Ministry of Culture, Lebanon/Directorate General of Antiquities.

juniper are not native to Egypt, but originate in the higher altitudes of Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

In the later 4th millennium BC, Byblos was a significant coastal settlement as its archaeological evidence attests (Dunand 1973b-c; Prag 1986; see Chapter 9). Silver objects found in early Byblos tombs form a significant status marker and like Egypt, the metal is not native to the region. The nearest source was the 'Silver Mountain' of Cilicia in southern Turkey, with other mines of the era known in the Aegean (Prag 1978; Maran 2021). Silver in Egypt may have originated from these far-flung regions via the Lebanese coast. Long distance land and sea networks are also seen in the appearance of Mesopotamian motifs on Egyptian carved artefacts, small amounts of imported pottery and crucially, the emergence of writing, coeval with the Uruk trade expansion from southern Mesopotamia (Wengrow 2006, 136-42). For this period, Byblos is the port of likely origin for direct and down-the-line networks reaching from deep within western Asia.

Imported ceramic jars found in Tomb U-j at Abydos in southern Egypt dating to c. 3320 BC provide further evidence of Lebanese connections. Belonging to an early local ruler, the tomb was richly furnished with hundreds of imported vessels, used as containers for liquid commodities, notably wine. This astonishing number reveals the scope and reach of early Egyptian elite acquisition of raw materials, manufactured items and liquid commodities. The tomb also included imported obsidian, lapis lazuli, a box made from Lebanese cedar and foodstuffs. Ceramic analysis exposed a wide range of Levantine manufacturing centres,



Figure 12.2: Unscripted diorite squat jar, 2nd-3rd Dynasty, from the Baalat Gebal Temple. AO 11067 © Louvre Museum / Thierry Olivier.

including vessels made of clays originating from Lebanon (Hartung et al. 2015). This evidence points to the region as an early trade node, and given the size and quantity of the jars (height >40 cm) it seems unlikely that overland donkey transport was used for their acquisition.

At this time, networks involved land and maritime journeys, although as timber acquisition and ship-building technologies improved, so did the scale of seafaring (Prag 1986; Marfoe 1987, 27). The connection emerges emphatically in the Egyptian First Dynasty (c. 3100-2870 BC). Tall, slender jars made of shapes best known from Byblos appear in tombs of the Egyptian elite (Fig. 9.6). Further data obtained through analyses of ceramic jars found in tombs at Abydos, Helwan and Abu Rawash indicate origins from coastal and inland sites of Lebanon (Köhler and Ownby 2011; Iserlis et al. 2019; Sowada et al. 2021). These results are supported by the presence of imported cedar in elite tombs of the period, acquisition of which formed the backbone of exchange activity. Over the next few centuries, the relationship between Egypt and Byblos escalated to a point of religious, cultural and economic importance for both state and polity.

**Egypt exposed: early archaeological work at Byblos**

French archaeologists Pierre Montet (1921-1924) and Maurice Dunand (1925-1975) ranged widely over the Byblos promontory, recovering extensive evidence of Egyptian activity (see Chapter 15). The material dated

to various phases of the site’s occupation, but of intense interest were 3rd millennium BC artefacts, coeval with the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom. Egyptian carved stone vessels in many shapes such as bowls, jars, small circular tables and miniature vessels of fine travertine (alabaster) were discovered in large quantities, along with flint knives used for slaughtering animals, furniture fragments, sculptural pieces, and many other objects. Although most stone vessels were fragmentary and ‘out of context’ (i.e., found in deposits *later* than their date of production), a number were carved with the names and titles in hieroglyphs of Egyptian kings, several queens, and even officials. The names of many Old Kingdom kings, from Khufu to Pepi II (4th-6th Dynasties, c. 2613-2184 BC), were represented (Fig. 12.1). Some other uninscribed stone vessels belonged to the 1st-3rd Dynasties, pointing to earlier connections noted above (Fig. 12.2; Sowada 2009, 134, fig. 28 [no. 163c], App. I.1-5).

The stone vessels are regarded as diplomatic gifts, temple offerings and trade items, with the name of the king signifying a personal ‘calling card’ from the pharaoh himself (Bevan 2007, 70, 76-78). At the time, their discovery along with many other artefacts prompted intense speculation regarding the role of Egyptians at Byblos. Some other finds were architectural elements, suggesting Egyptian structures, or buildings with heavy Egyptian influences. Were they built by Egyptians resident at the site, or did it represent emulation of Egyptian cultural forms by Byblite elites? That the Egyptian state established a permanent presence or even



Figure 12.3: The so-called ‘Byblos seal’ and an impression of the text, with the Egyptian name for Byblos, *keben*, visible on the last line to the right. DGA 25745 © Ministry of Culture, Lebanon/Directorate General of Antiquities.



Figure 12.4: Complete examples found in Egypt of types found in and around the Baalat Gebal Temple. F 1926/6.5, AAL 112, AAL 114 © Dutch National Museum of Antiquities.

a colony during this period was proposed and widely held. A cylinder seal with an inscription in hieroglyphs bearing the words *keben*, the name of the local deity, and the name of a Byblos ruler, suggested that it was carved by Egyptians for the local leader (Fig. 12.3; Montet 1928a, 62-81; Goedicke 1963). Many stone vessels, such as circular offering tables and jars (Fig. 12.4), types associated with cultic activity, were found in deposits in and around the Baalat Gebal Temple, implying Egyptian offerings to the local cult (Bevan 2007, 76-78). Importantly, did the Egyptians worship the local female deity and was it eventually conflated with the Egyptian goddess Hathor (Espinel 2002)? Over the decades, these questions have proved difficult to answer.

Problematically, much of the data has defied detailed explanation owing to the nature of the archaeological methods used in Montet's and Dunand's excavations. In addition, some objects are known only through old drawings and photographs. The best reconstruction

of the site's 3rd millennium archaeology remains that of Muntaha Saghieh (1983), who pieced together the stratigraphy based on the published reports and fieldnotes. However, through the archaeological work and later studies, it is possible to discern the pattern and nature of continuous engagement between Egypt and Byblos from the 4th to 6th Dynasties, and evidence of much earlier contact.

### **Byblos in early Egyptian texts**

Despite the volume of Egyptian material at Byblos, written evidence from the period regarding actual visits is slender. Texts generally allude to foreign products without stating the source. Dating to the 6th Dynasty (c. 2345-2181 BC), an inscription on the wall of the rock-cut tomb of Khui at Qubbet el-Hawa (near modern Aswan) mentions officials making multiple trips to *keben* (Newberry 1938). The likelihood that other texts exist but are now lost or undiscovered is shown by the recently published biographical inscription





Figure 12.5: Cedar coffin belonging to Idu, ‘Overseer of the House of *ash*-wood’, Giza, 6th Dynasty, c. 2345-2181 BC. Inv. 2511,1-2 © Römer und Pelizaeus Museum, Hildesheim.

of the official Iny (Marcolin and Espinel 2011). He held the title ‘seal-bearer of the god [i.e., the king]’, showing he acted on behalf of the pharaoh. Iny led multiple royal maritime voyages to Byblos and the Levant during a career spanning the reigns of 6th Dynasty kings Pepi I, Merenre and Pepi II (date range c. 2321-2184 BC).

This inscription is the most detailed record of foreign trade missions thus identified from the Pyramid Age. It paints a vivid picture of official expeditions, a pattern that probably reflects the nature of many such voyages from previous centuries. In addition to Byblos, the text also names other regional locations and a shopping list of commodities brought back by returning ships. These include lapis lazuli, silver, tin/lead, *sefetj*-oil, local people and ‘Byblos-ships’.

The words ‘ships’ and ‘Byblos’ recall forests of magnificent Lebanese cedar for which the region was richly famous in antiquity (Rich 2017). Known in Egyptian texts as *ash*-wood, it was prized for boat-building, monumental architecture, statuary, coffins and small objects (Fig. 12.5). *Ash*-wood formed the backbone of Egypt’s relationship with the Lebanese coast, with Byblos as the gateway to the high-country timber region near Tripoli. The most visible expression of this trade today is the royal boat of king Khufu (c. 2589-2566 BC), found in 1954 at the foot of his Giza pyramid. A full-size barge of 43.3 m made for river transport, it features multiple cedar hull beams – some planks are 23 m in length – raising questions about the nature of mechanisms required to cut and transport timber on this scale. The barge

is made for Nile River travel, and thus might be different from a ‘Byblos ship’ fashioned in Byblos.

The trade in cedar and other products was organised as a state enterprise. Led by trusted official agents and diplomats like Iny, missions involved flotillas of ships leaving and returning during the sailing season. Agents of the state may have been stationed at Byblos for a period of time. A returning expedition is even depicted on the pyramid causeway of king Sahure at Abusir (c. 2487-2475 BC): multiple ships bearing Egyptians and foreigners (Byblites?) all raise their hands in adoration of the king. This scene almost certainly depicts, even if symbolically, a returning voyage from Byblos and the Levantine coast.

### **Byblos in the Egyptian consciousness**

The depiction of foreign expeditions on a royal funerary monument demonstrates their importance to the ideology of Egyptian kingship. The kings’ capacity to project his power was embodied in two elements of his divine qualities – that of maintaining cosmic order (*ma’at*) through protection of Egypt from external forces of chaos, and his ‘domination’ of and benevolence to faraway lands. At this time, Byblos was too distant to be a territorial threat. The acquisition, royal display and gifting of luxury products enhanced the kings’ status and enriched temple endowments, but for family and trusted officials, also signified social standing. Byblos acquired an almost mythical position in the Egyptian consciousness, as a distant land with bountiful exotica,

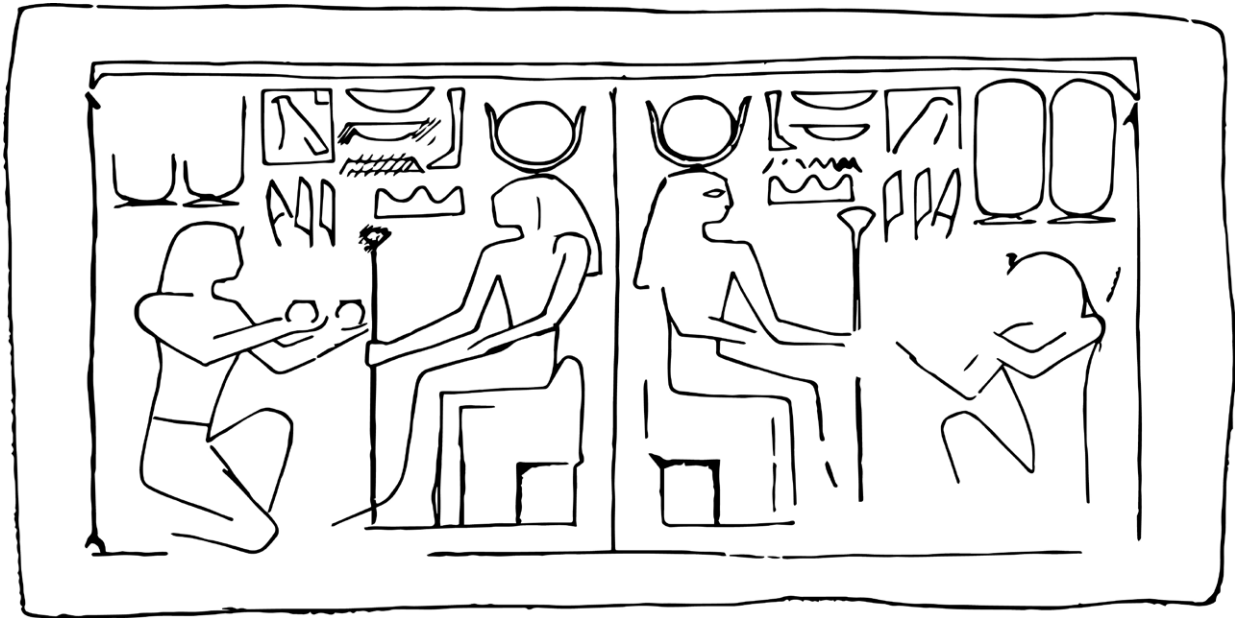


Figure 12.6: Stone lintel from Byblos depicting the goddess Hathor 'Lady of Byblos' with a kneeling king, possibly Pepi I, 6th Dynasty. DGA 2028 © Ministry of Culture, Lebanon/Directorate General of Antiquities. Drawing after Montet 1928a, fig. 6.

access to which was a sign of royal favour and capable of improving one's status in the present and in the afterlife.

Yet the archaeological evidence at Byblos depicts a complex relationship based on more than trade. The 'Byblos seal' (Fig. 12.3) reveals the significant cultural influence on Byblos rulers, and even the design of the Baalat Gebal Temple is regarded as having strong Egyptian influence (Saghieh 1983). The large number of stone vessels deposited in and around the temple indicates Egyptian regard for its deity over a long

period. The quantity of stone vessels dated to the 5th and 6th Dynasties increases exponentially in the mid to late Pyramid Age, with the names of 6th Dynasty kings Pepi I and Pepi II heavily represented. Many scholars believe that the deity worshipped at the temple by this time was conflated with the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who came to be associated with expeditionary activity (Espinel 2002). By the Middle Kingdom (c.1900 BC), she was known as 'Lady of Byblos' and was patron of expeditions generally. Evidence for this title in the Pyramid Age is





Figure 12.7: Egyptian flint knife from Byblos, Old Kingdom, c. 2613-2181 BC. Inv. 5004 © AUB Archaeological Museum.

ephemeral but it signifies a plausible explanation for the Egyptian regard of the local cult. Even at Byblos, none of the many Egyptian stone vessel fragments unequivocally bear the Hathor title ‘Lady of Byblos’, although it is a possible reconstruction of certain objects (e.g., DGA 15556). A carved stone lintel known as the *Relief de la Maisonette* (Fig. 12.6; Montet 1928a, 35-38; 1929, pl. 28 [no. 11]) is a further clue. ‘Hathor Mistress of Byblos’ is the named deity, with a king making offerings. However, the name of the king is not visible in the royal cartouches (name-rings) and the ruler’s kneeling stance is rarely attested in the Pyramid Age. The date of the block remains debated but it represents a potential key link in understanding the religious significance of the Egypt-Byblos relationship.

A considerable quantity of Egyptian flint knives of a kind used for butchering animals were also found in the temple precincts (Fig. 12.7). Such knives are depicted in Egyptian wall scenes in the slaughter of cattle. Could this point to animal sacrifice and feasting on the part of Egyptians and Byblite elites at the temple as part of a cultic ritual? The successful arrival of the fleet would have been cause for celebration by all involved (see Chapter 21).

### **Byblos and mechanisms of international exchange**

Crucial to the success of Byblos was its location, affording access to other regions such as Ugarit, the fertile Beqaa Valley, the Akkar Plain and the Syrian hinterland. Such routes extended the Egyptian ‘reach’ through direct and indirect access, into which Byblite elites were co-opted. Evidence is revealed by Egypt’s relations with the major north Syrian polity of Ebla (see Chapter 13). Many Egyptian



Figure 12.8: Combed jar from Edfu, late 5th Dynasty-early 6th Dynasty, c. 2400 BC. E16577 © Louvre Museum / Maurice et Pierre Chazeville.

stone vessels were found in the Palace G complex, including two with the names of Khafre (c. 2558-2532 BC) and Pepi I (c. 2321-2287 BC), attesting to Egyptian relations with the city (Matthiae Scandone 1981; Bevan 2007, 78; Sowada 2009, 141-44, 222-23).

The mechanism for this relationship is now known to have included Byblos and a regional network of agents. The Ebla Archive of cuneiform inscriptions, dating to c. 2330/2300 BC, holds the clues. Various clay tablets reveal the roles of different envoys from Egypt, Byblos (respectively identified as Dugurasu and *DULu* in the Ebla texts), and ‘hired’ agents from inland Syria. All these people were directly involved in mediating the relationship between Ebla and the Egyptian state for goods such as lapis lazuli, tin and silver (Biga and Steinkeller 2021; see Chapter 13). According to the Ebla Texts, Byblite envoys, regional agents and Eblite representatives even travelled to Egypt at different times. When set alongside the biographical inscription of Iny dating to the same period, we are presented with a wider international exchange network, complete with the names of certain individuals, with Byblos at its geographical centre.

Product acquisition management is further evident in the manufacture of two-handled ceramic combed jars used for transport of oils and resins (Fig. 12.8). Analysis reveals that imported jars in Egypt were made in the Byblos region, if not at Byblos itself. Moreover, jars

even differed in their manufacture: the clays producing stronger jars more suited to long-distance travel made their way to Egypt (MFA 37.2724, E 16577), compared to clays for jars used at Byblos (Fig. 9.4; Badreshany et al. 2022). This suggests local specialised ceramic production ‘made to order’ for the needs of the Egyptian state. Further light is thus shed onto product acquisition and social complexity at Byblos: elites of the city co-operated with Egyptian agents to deliver commodities to the specifications of their customer. Seal-bearer of the god Iny and his crew may have been one such mercantile party working to ensure this.

## Conclusion

Byblos was a meeting point of interregional cultures and commodity exchange networks, enabling the Egyptian state to extend its trade and diplomatic activity directly and indirectly for centuries into the eastern Mediterranean. For both Egypt and Byblos, the interdependence of the relationship is visible in the centuries-long nature of its interaction and the religious connection of cultures at the Baalat Gebal Temple. Status and prestige cloaked both sides in status display at home, however for the Byblos elite, adoption of Egyptian cultural forms was a form of royal patronage that increased its regional status. At some point around c. 2200 BC, Egyptian expeditions ceased for reasons that may have involved events in Egypt and along the coast of Lebanon itself, thus severing the supply chain.

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