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The silent coast: Zooarchaeological evidence to the development trajectory of a second millennium palace at Tel Kabri



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ABSTRACT

The second millennium BC palaces along the coast of the southern Levant served as political and ideological centers of small, seaside polities. The seeming lack of literate administration and the evidence for non-intensive subsistence practices suggest, however, that a different political economic infrastructure lay at the foundation of these south Levantine peers to the palaces in Knossos and Mari. An analysis of the faunal remains from the Middle Bronze Age palace at Tel Kabri shows persistence of low-intensity traditional economy as the palace underwent a phase of territorial and cultural growth. Changes in butchery practices and culinary habits at that time resonate elite emulation of their peers across the sea, in resemblance to other fields of material culture. Our conclusion is that a palatial culture, complete with eastern Mediterranean elite trappings, could be grafted in the southern Levant to a stock of traditional and non-specialized economy with no literate administration.

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*The heavenly music over the sand
Sounds with the grains as they hurry
Hiding the golden mountains and mansions
Of the grave, gay, seaside land.*

[Dylan Thomas, *We Lying by Seasand*, 1933.]

1. Introduction

The palatial establishments that were the ideological and economic foci of second millennium BC societies around the eastern Mediterranean have been intensively-studied for a century. Scholarly work has revealed a plethora of historical and archaeological evidence to the nature of these Bronze Age institutions (e.g. for the Aegean Galaty and Parkinson, 2007; Pullen, 2010; Driessen et al., 2002; for the Ancient Near East Margueron, 1997; Miglus, 2004; Morandi-Bonacossi, 2007). As recently phrased by Broodbank (2013: 8400), palaces "...serve as a shorthand for a physical and organizational structure, dedicated to large-scale

farming, storage and processing, skilled multi-media manufacture, technological know-how and innovation in hot-house conditions, literate supervision of the complex flow of materials and labor demanded by such tasks, as well as trade and gift-giving (often deploying its own high-value products), both internally and with peers beyond the palace's rule". This definition attributes to palaces an explicitly central economic role (see also Postgate, 1992: 137–154; 2004), which goes beyond more general designations such as complex rulers' residences (Pillsbury and Evans, 2004: 1). The archetype for the organization of the 2nd millennium BC Mediterranean emerges mainly from archives at Mari, Knossos, Ugarit, and Pylos. The extensive evidence provided by these major centers of east Mediterranean Bronze Age civilization constitute the basis for Broodbank's definition, which stresses the role of palaces as the interconnected hubs of contemporary regional and international political economic networks, and as seat to literate administrative apparatuses that controlled intensive agricultural and pastoral production, the latter with emphasis on wool (Halstead, 2009; Rougemont, 2004).

The central role of literate administration in the Aegean and Syrian Bronze Age palaces is not, however, common to all east Mediterranean palaces at that time. Of special interest in this respect are the small polities that sprang along the central Mediterranean seaboard at the beginning of the second millennium BC, and which mark the first appearance of the Canaanites.

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Sitting in the geographical heart of the region where the commercial interaction between Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Aegean took place, these small polities were of major importance to the second millennium BC Mediterranean network. Each polity typically consisted of an outlet to the sea, often through an estuary or other natural anchorage point, and a geographical transect into the hilly interior with its woodland and pasture resources. The political center straddled and bound both zones from an intermediate position, at the foothills where agriculture and horticulture could be practiced, pastoral production coordinated, and maritime activity controlled (Ilan, 1995).

The social organization of these small polities in the second millennium is essentially unknown, and is extrapolated, with adjustments for scale, from better-documented palatial economies to the north (Ebla, Mari, Ugarit), east (Hazor), south (Avaris), and west (Knossos, Pylos). There are, however, at least two reasons to suspect that the polities along the central Levantine coast were not the 'typical' palatial entities writ small. The first reason is the notable textual silence of the contemporary central and south Levantine coast. Decades of work on Middle Bronze Age sites – Nahariya, Tel Akko, Tel Mevorach, Tel Nami, Tel Dor, Tel Michal, Tel Grisa, Yavne, Tel Ashdod, and Tel Ashkelon, to name some – have failed to turn up evidence to literate administration. We agree, naturally, to the dictum on the absence of evidence and its inadequacy as evidence to absence; but the extent of archaeological excavations along the southern Levantine coast is such that makes it legitimate, in our opinion, to raise doubt as to the role and importance of literate administration in the political economy of the region.

Secondly, a recent study points out essential differences in livestock economy between the most extensively excavated second millennium palace on the central Levantine coast, Tel Kabri, and contemporary Hazor, which was a neighboring polity and a literate palatial administrative establishment *sensu stricto* (Marom et al., 2014; Horowitz and Oshima, 2006: 10–15). In Middle Bronze Age (MBA) Hazor, historically-documented manufacture of wool dictated specialized pastoral production that left a signature in the animal bone assemblage from the upper city, which is very much dominated by the remains of younger adult male sheep. Contemporary Kabri, however, shows a generalized and diverse animal economy, based mainly on small-scale husbandry of goat, pig, and cattle. This suite of livestock is typical of mixed agriculture, probably with an element of short-ranged, seasonal transhumance, and is at home in the Plain of Akko from the Neolithic onwards (Getzov et al., 2009; Marom and Getzov, in press). This animal economy, unaided by literate administration, is outstanding when considered in view of the Aegean frescoes (Cline et al., 2011), Egyptian imports, and wine storage facilities uncovered in Kabri, and underwrites the possibility of fundamental differences in political economy between palatial entities, even neighboring ones such as Hazor and Kabri.

There are relatively few cases by which to investigate the polities of this 'silent' central and southern coast of the Levant. There exist few sites that show stratigraphic development within second millennium BC monumental structures, and which are therefore useful in studying palatial economic trajectories; and given the absence of texts, the evidence from several classes of material culture remains are needed to obtain synoptic accounts of such trajectories. The palace at Tel Kabri, which was intensively investigated in the last forty years, satisfies these conditions by providing comprehensive survey, pottery, architectural, and zooarchaeological data (Cline et al., 2011, 2012; Marom et al., 2014; Yasur-Landau et al., 2008).

In the present study we wish to deepen our investigation of the political economy and social organization of the MBA palace at Kabri by carrying out a diachronic zooarchaeological analysis, capitalizing on the rare internal stratigraphy of the monumental

complex in its growth. Such analysis is expected to reveal patterns that transcend the monolithic description of low-intensity livestock production noted previously, and can potentially shed light on (a) the *articulation of political economy* with territorial expansion and consolidation; and (b) processes of *elite identity formation* through culinary elaboration. This investigation will contrast the earlier phase of the palace with its later phase, when the palace expanded substantially as it bound the settlement of the western upper Galilee into a unified polity in its wake. At this later phase, the sumptuous size of the palatial building was buttressed by Minoan-style frescoes to present a vision of elite might, which must have comprised of more ephemeral and preformative displays of power, where animals played a role as food, capital, and sacrifices.

In the context of the trajectory of political and economic growth evident in the Kabri palace, changes in the faunal assemblage in time can be viewed through the twin lenses of provisioning and identity formation. In regard to provisioning, the expansion of a palatial establishment would have entailed a higher number of political specialists and dependents that had to be supplied animal products. The basic framework for understanding the process of provisioning was laid out by Zeder (1988, 1991), and includes increased selection for livestock taxa, age, sex, and body-portion groups as production and supply chains grew in length and complexity. More specifically, we expect to observe in the later phases of the palace more uniform age-at-death among the sheep and goats; more emphasis on male animals; a more restricted spectrum of body portions, with more consumption waste as opposed to lower limb elements; and an increase in the sheep to goat ratio. We would also expect to see a decline in the relative frequency of pigs (Zeder, 1998).

If we accept that palace elites attempted to formulate a common identity with peer palatial elites at the expense of increasingly exclusionary practices setting them apart from the local population, we should be attentive to changes in cuisine that fulfill that same function. Meat-eating was often done in public and could serve as a medium for propagating social messages of exclusion and prestige toward other status groups in the same society by elaboration in ingredients, ways of preparation, and flaunts of exotica; the same means could also be used to structure consumer elite identity in relation to peer status groups in other settlements.

One of the ways by which culinary elaboration is achieved is by using rare ingredients. In the realm of animal foods, game animals and exotic fish, for example, would be obvious candidates to serve as luxury foods (Ervynck et al., 2003). Also, changes in food processing techniques may indicate innovation, and openness to other ways of doing things; this is a relatively easy mechanism to convert information on the outside world, obtained through inter-elite exchange, into status-enhancing local assets. More specifically, the composition of the faunal assemblages from the earlier and later phases of the palace can be examined to detect changes indicating increased consumption of luxury foods, as well as in butchery practices, which may hint at such new ways of doing things.

To summarize, the expansion of the Kabri polity is echoed by the increase in size and elaboration of the palace, which was at the polity's political apex. This process of growth should be reflected in evidence for increased provisioning in the zooarchaeological record, when comparing the earlier to the later assemblages from the palace. Furthermore, we expect to detect evidence for culinary elaboration and novelty *in tandem* with increased provisioning.

2. Site and setting

Tel Kabri is a 34 hectare site located in the western Galilee of modern-day Israel, five kilometers east of Nahariya (Fig. 1). At its

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