

## RESEÑAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS / BOOK REVIEWS

GWANGHYUN D. CHOI. *Decoding Canaanite Pottery Paintings from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I: Classification and Analysis of Decorative Motifs and Design Structures-Statistics, Distribution Patterns—Cultural and Socio-Political Implications*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica 37. Fribourg and Göttingen, Academic Press and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016. 290 + CD-ROM. ISBN: 978-3-525-53039-9. € 140.

This book is an ambitious attempt at cataloging and extracting meaning from the huge corpus of southern Levantine painted pottery of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I, stemming from a Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The entire venture is commendable for both its innovative nature and its impressive scope: it is the first comprehensive attempt to catalog systematically all the motifs of “Canaanite” pottery, and it relies on a massive corpus of 3,225 vessels and sherds. It is most surprising that there is no such previous study, bearing in mind the rich corpus of works on comparative typology of pottery in the Bronze and Iron Ages in the southern Levant, including such pinnacles as Amiran’s 1970 classic and the recent much elaborated volumes edited by Gitin (2015). Furthermore, there are other basic studies of motifs on decorated pottery from the southern Levant, such as Dothan’s (1982) study, deeply influenced by Furumark’s seminal work, *The Mycenaean Pottery: Analysis and Classification* (1941) with its catalog of painted motifs. More recently, a vast catalog of Philistine iconography was published, including pottery, figurines and other representations.<sup>1</sup>

Choi’s work comprises five chapters and an electronic database:

Chapter I, *Typology of Painted Pottery Vessels and Method for the Classification of Decorative Motifs*, deals with the typology of the painted pottery, enumerating twenty-two types of local painted forms. The pottery is not divided strictly by typological forms, as common in typological studies in excavation reports, but by broader, generalized categories. Thus, all the Late Bronze and Iron I bowls are divided into two classes: interior-painted bowls

<sup>1</sup> Ben-Shlomo 2010.

and exterior-painted bowls (pp. 5–6). A discussion of the methodology for classifying the decorations follows this division. Overall, the corpus is divided into four main categories and no less than 66 classes of decoration, many of which are further divided into types and subtypes, creating an extremely detailed classification system (pp. 23–30). The chapter closes with a survey of the archaeological theory of style (pp. 32–40).

Chapter II, *Typology of Decorative Motifs*, describes the decorative motifs of the corpus by categories and subcategories. Every motif is described in detail, followed by a discussion of its chronology and a review of previous studies of the painted vessels. This chapter is lavishly illustrated with many hundreds of line drawings. There is some overlap between groups, e.g., between those of Tree + Quadrupe (Class 24), Tree + Quadrupe + Bird (Class 26), Tree + Quadrupe + Fish (Class 27) (pp. 101–108) and the Tree of Life group (Class 41) (pp. 124–125). Some discussion segments, like that dedicated to the musician, featuring the Orpheus Jug from Megiddo (pp. 83–90), or the common/ubiquitous Symbol of Life group (pp. 125–129) are quite extensive, and are, in fact, excursus that go far beyond the discussion of decorative motif themes on pottery.

Chapter III, *Structures of Canaanite Pottery Paintings*, analyzes classes of design structures—each composed of several combined decorative geometric motifs. These include the Simple Stripe designs, the Geometric-frieze designs, Metopic designs, Free-style designs and Circle designs. The Middle Bronze II and Late Bronze sources of inspiration for these designs are then discussed, from the Bichrome and Chocolate-on-White wares to the Amuq-Cilician Ware and the Nuzi Ware; the latter two show the closest affinity to painted pottery from Canaan (pp. 195–211).

Chapter IV, *Statistics of Occurrences and Distribution Analysis*, presents the statistics for each motif and design structure. The size of the sample for each site depends heavily on the scale of the excavation, e.g., there are 408 vessels from Beth-Shean, 306 from Megiddo and only 4 from Tel 'Eitun (p. 212). The data are presented according to numerous variables, including the number of occurrences of each motif and its distribution, ratios of various design structures, the colors used for painting and the archaeological contexts of the painted pottery.

Chapter V, *Cultural and Socio-Political Implications of Canaanite Pottery Paintings*, is a discussion of the cultural background of the Canaanite painted pottery, combining the iconographic and statistical data with the

available historical and archaeological sources. Two main arguments are presented: one concerns the nature of the Tree of Life motif and its connection with "...a cult of blessing" (p. 237) and the other regards the reasons for its popularity and decline.

Choi's first argument is that the most common decorative motif during those periods was the tree, especially the palm (pp. 124–125). It often appears on vessel handles, sometimes in schematic form, resembling a "Union Jack" pattern (pp. 165–168). This type of motif was always painted during the making of the vessel, and was identified by Choi as the Tree of Life, a part of the broader Symbol of Life group, which includes both the tree and the pubic triangle as sacred symbols (p. 126). It was interpreted as a symbol of fertility, but not as one related to a specific divinity or her visual form (pp. 129, 236–237). Elsewhere, I suggested a slight alternative: the use of the schematic palm tree motif on the handles of Canaanite pottery, especially on jar handles, was much more than general "marks of blessing," as argued by Choi (p. 169), but rather an explicit, apotropaic use of symbol of the goddess Elat/Athirat/Asherah, meant to invoke her protection of the jar and its nourishing contents.<sup>2</sup>

As for Choi's second argument, he explains the popularity of the Tree of Life motif as emanating from the hopeless sociopolitical situation of the Canaanites under Egyptian rule, which pushed the non-elites to seek solace in the Canaanite cults and in the promise of blessing embodied in symbolism, and therefore to consume pottery decorated by these symbols. The end of the Egyptian empire and its oppression led to the decline of the use of this symbolism (pp. 239–240; see also 241). I would like to argue that the explanation for the decline of symbolism is more intricate, and extends beyond the end of the Egyptian rule in Canaan. The Tree of Life motif became considerably rarer in the beginning of the Iron Age in Philistia, and seems to have been replaced by the Aegean-style bird motifs, which appear on Monochrome and Bichrome pottery and stemmed from representations in the Aegean world, in which birds are connected with invisible presence of a goddess.<sup>3</sup> Yet it was neither the collapse of the Egyptian domination nor the arrival of the Philistines that ended the use of the Tree of Life motif. It seems that, at least in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Canaanite and Aegean cultic symbolism coexisted, as seen, for example, in the case of two ring base kraters from Ekron; these

<sup>2</sup> Yasur-Landau 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Yasur-Landau 2008: 216–220.

kraters, while an Aegean form, are nonetheless decorated with palm trees, a theme that is otherwise absent from the Aegean-style pottery repertoire.<sup>4</sup> This is an indication that Canaanite cultic traditions related to the worship of the goddess Ashera appeared side by side with the worship of an Aegean goddess in Philistia of the early Iron Age, just as Canaanite and Aegean-inspired material culture traits appeared in every house in Philistia.<sup>5</sup> The decline of Egyptian rule in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE was far from being a decisive event in the decline of the pictorial pottery. The Orpheus Jug from Megiddo Stratum VIA dates to the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE—more than a century after the end of Egyptian domination in the northern valleys, and also the arrival of the Philistines. A detailed iconographic study shows the astonishing combination of local Canaanite, Aegean and Cypriot origins of the shape of the vessel and its decorative motifs, reflecting the adaptive, vibrant nature of Canaanite art well into the Iron Age.<sup>6</sup> The tradition of iconography of fertility goddesses and palm trees flanked by quadrupeds hardly vanishes from the Canaanite popular religion of the Iron Age, as seen in the Yavneh *favissa*, a rich collection of ceramic stands, chalices, altars and other cult-related objects, dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, found at the tell of Yavneh. Many of the 120 cultic stands feature combinations of female figures, lions and bulls, horned animals and palm trees—all motifs found also on decorated Canaanite pottery.<sup>7</sup>

The volume is closed with a short conclusion section (pp. 241–242) recapping the main points raised in Chapter V.

Enclosed with this volume is a CD-ROM with the database of the discussed assemblage, including a complete description of each vessel and sherd and their archaeological contexts and chronology, as well as a list of references.

To conclude, this volume closes a major gap in the study of both Late Bronze and Iron Age I pottery in the southern Levant, as well as in the study of Canaanite iconography. It is a major contribution to research, and will be used as both an authoritative catalog and an exceptional scientific synthesis. The author deserves to be commended for the vast amount of meticulous work that he put into preparing this important study. As new examples of painted pottery emerge every month in excavations, it may be advisable to publish the catalog online and allow updates and searches, perhaps in a format

<sup>4</sup> Yasur-Landau 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Yasur-Landau 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Yasur-Landau 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Yasur-Landau 2016.

similar to that of the Levantine Ceramics Project (<https://www.levantineceramics.org/>).

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