Our Cups Overfloweth: “Kabri Goblets” and Canaanite Feasts in the Middle Bronze Age Levant

Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric H. Cline, and Inbal Samet

ABSTRACT Excavations at Tel Kabri in Israel have uncovered a goblet type—the so-called “Kabri Goblet”—which is without clear parallels in the Middle Bronze Age ceramic repertoire of the southern Levant. Dozens of complete and fragmentary examples found in middle and late MB II phases (17th and early 16th centuries B.C.E.) indicate that this was a common drinking ware in both palatial and domestic contexts. Its decoration, as well as its shape, however, may be deliberate archaisms. The form has its origin in goblet types used in the region of the Western Galilee already in the Intermediate Bronze Age. This conservatism stands in stark contrast to the willingness of the Kabri elite to consume imported Cypriot pottery (or rather the goods shipped within such pottery) and to commission Aegean art as painted decoration within the palace.

INTRODUCTION

Banqueting practices within a palatial setting, as well as the use of the feast as a political tool in the hands of the ruler, have been thoroughly discussed in Aegean archaeology in recent years, culminating in numerous articles appearing in several edited volumes and elsewhere (Wright, ed., 2004; Halstead and Barrett, eds., 2004; Mee and Renard, eds., 2007; Hitchcock, Laffineur, and Crowley, eds., 2008). These studies, including at least one by Jeremy Rutter (2004), to whom we respectfully and in gratitude dedicate this article, have used iconography, ceramics, spatial analysis, textual evidence, zooarchaeology, or a combination of several of these sources and methods to create a rich and multifaceted description of the role of feasts in the Mycenaean and Minoan palatial societies.

At the same time, the study of Bronze Age feasts in the southern Levant palatial societies has been much more limited in scale and in the sources used, with several notable exceptions that deal mainly with the Late Bronze Age, including Bietak’s (2002, 2003) studies of the possible Marzeh in the Fosse Temple at Lachish, Zuckerman’s (2007) study of sacrifice patterns in Hazor, and Ziffer’s (1999, 2005) iconographic analysis of the banquet scene in the Levant. In comparison, attempts to compare and contrast Aegean and Canaanite feasting practices are much less numerous (e.g., Yasur-Landau 2005a, 2008).

The most conspicuous lacuna in the study of the feast in the southern Levant is the research of Middle Bronze Age palatial, domestic, and funerary assemblages. The four centuries of this period, roughly from 1950 to 1550 B.C.E., were the formative period for the creation of Canaanite religion, political structure, settlement hierarchy, domestic and official architecture, and trade patterns. This was also the period of the rise of palaces that were the political centers of regional polities (Ilan 1995; Maeir 2000; Yasur-Landau, Cline, and Pierce 2008).

Palaces have been identified in the southern Levant primarily according to criteria of size and monumentality (Oren 1992: 105). The earliest palatial structures are datable to the middle part of the MB I (ca. 1950–1750 B.C.E.), with examples from Megiddo Area BB, Stratum XII (Loud 1948, figs. 308, 415) and Aphek Palaces I and II, Strata X17–18 and A XI (Herzog 1997: 111–113; Kochavi and Yadin 2002, 198–196; Yadin 2009, 11–18). Palaces became more common in the MB II, with most examples belonging to the courtyard type. Examples include Megiddo Area BB, Stratum XI, and Area BB, Stratum X (Loud 1948, figs. 380, 399; Herzog 1997, 150–153); Tell el-Ajjul (Kemp-
Despite the fact that these palaces were for the most part meticulously excavated and well published, there are almost no studies reconstructing activities carried out within them, including banqueting. It is the aim of this article, therefore, to contribute, if even in a humble and very partial way, to the understanding of Middle Bronze feasting practices in Levantine palaces by examining some types of drinking vessels used in the palace, tombs, and domestic contexts of MB II Kabri. This was a Canaanite site located in the western Galilee, several kilometers inland from the Mediterranean Sea, which flourished for several centuries during the Middle Bronze Age (see Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002 and, most recently Yasur-Landau and Cline 2008, 2009, with previous references).

**MIDDLE BRONZE DRINKING VESSELS AND PRACTICES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

During the MB I, two major groups of serving vessels evolved: shallow and deep bowls. The shallow bowls or platters (Amiran 1969, pl. 25, 4–9; Ziffer 1990, 31*–33*) were very likely used for serving food, while deep bowls, whether hemispherical, globular, or carinated (Amiran 1969, pls. 25: 3, 27: 1–4), were used for serving drink. During the later part of the MB II, a tall “trumpet”-shaped base (not a stem) was added to the carinated bowls, which created the chalice form (Amiran 1969, pl. 27: 21–24; Ziffer 1990, 35*–36*), while similar bases added to globular bowls created the pedestal vase, especially common at Jericho (Ziffer 1990, 34*–35*).

The Canaanite name for the entire range of drinking vessels, ‘kos’, has been preserved in Ugaritic sources of the early first millennium (Ziffer 1990, 33*–34*). Thus, we read of the kos held by the god Ba’al in a feast (KTU 1.3 1 10–11):

ytm . ks . bdh/ krp[m]nn . bklat . ydh (Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín 1995, 10): “he will put a *ks* (drinking bowl) in his hand, a *krm[n]* (pot, from Akkadian *karpatu*; Gelb et al., eds., 1956–, K: 219) in both hands.”

The designation of a drinking vessel as *kos* appears in inscribed Ancient Iron Age, possibly tenth century B.C.E., bowls from Tekke in Crete and from Kefar Veradim in Israel. The Tekke inscription, incised on a hemispherical copper alloy bowl, reads ks šml [ ] bn I [ ] [ ]: “the *ks* of Shema, son of L[ ],” while the Kefar Veradim gourdred copper alloy bowl was incised with ks ps bn šm: “the *ks* of Pesa, son of Shama” (Alexandre 2002, *65*–*67; Sass 2005, 34–39).

The way to drink from the *kos* is well depicted in second-millennium B.C.E. iconography—cupping the round base of the drinking bowl in the open palm of the hand. This is a Syrian tradition, beginning early in the second millennium B.C.E. and seen, for example, on the Ebla basalt and limestone basins, showing rulers drinking from hemispherical bowls (Beck 1989, 338–340; Ziffer 1999, 195–196; 2005, figs. 16, 17), as well as on the two basalt statues from the royal tomb at Qatna, depicting rulers drinking from carinated bowls.

This way of holding the drinking vessel was not limited to bowls, as seen in seal impressions from Tell Mozan, showing the king and queen of Urkesh drinking from very deep bowls or goblets (Ziffer 2005, figs. 12, 13). Canaanite depictions of rulers drinking from bowls on the Megiddo and Tell el-Far’ah ivories (Yasur-Landau 2005b, fig. 1: 1–3), as well as on one Middle and two Late Bronze Age basalt statues from Hazor (Beck 1989, 338–346), show that Canaanite rulers and nobles used the *kos* in pretty much the same way throughout the second millennium and into the first millennium, as seen on the Ahiram sarcophagus from Byblos (Ziffer 2005, fig. 24b).

The ideology of Canaanite aristocrats drinking from a bowl is well represented also in the archaeological record, which yielded dozens of bronze bowls in elite tombs in the Levant and in Cyprus (Gershuny 1985; 2002, 203). These well-established practices of drinking from bowls may have been effective barriers to the introduction of stemmed drinking vessels, such as the *kylix*, from the Aegean to the Levant, via the trade of Mycenaean pottery, as evident by the relative scarcity of drinking vessels in the repertoire of imported Mycenaean pottery to Israel (Yasur-Landau 2005b, 174–178).

It is very likely that the use of pottery and metal forms of drinking bowls overlapped at least partially in the Middle Bronze Age, as evident, for example, in the silver carinated bowl from Byblos, which has direct ceramic parallels (Ziffer 1990, 33*; see also Amiran 1969, 94).

**“KABRI GOBLETS:” GOBLETS OR HANDLE-LESS CUPS AT MB II KABRI**

The most common drinking vessels at MB II Kabri have a concave ring base, almost vertical walls, and a simple rim. These are referred to as “goblets” in the 2002 Kabri excavation report (Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002). However, these forms lack stems and can, therefore, also be viewed as handle-less cups or deep bowls. Essentially we are dealing with two different types displaying several variants among them.

One type of goblet is more common in Kabri but is without numerous parallels from other sites. Each of these, referred
Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric H. Cline, and Inbal Samet

Fig. 1

1. "Kabri Goblet," has a hemispherical body and between one and four concentric incisions below the rim. Its diameter ranges from ca. 12 to 20 cm. The smallest of these goblets stand 9–10 cm tall, rim to base, while of the large specimens only the rims remain, and so their height cannot be determined with certainty. Among seventeen goblets of this type, three (Fig. 1.1–3) are red slipped and burnished on the exterior only; of nine other goblets (Fig. 1.5–9, 12–15), only the upper part remains, which is red slipped and burnished on the outside. In five of these cases (Fig. 1.5, 6, 7, 9, 13), the upper, inner part of the rim is also treated. While it is possible that these goblets were also entirely red slipped and burnished on the outside, some may have been similar to Fig. 1.11, in which the bottom part of the body and the base remain untreated (this specimen is considered a bowl rather than a goblet in Kempinski, Geršuny, and Scheffelowitz 2002, table accompanying fig. 5.41 on p. 150). Goblets in Figs. 1.4 and 1.17 are neither slipped nor burnished on the outside. Although the goblet in Fig. 1.17 seems to have been slipped and burnished only on the inner, upper part of the rim, it would seem more likely that both sides of the upper part of the rim were in fact treated and that this is not shown in the drawing.

The second type of goblet (Fig. 2.1–7) is carinated at its bottom, has no incisions under the rim, and has high walls above the carination that are never truly vertical but rather tend outward very slightly. Its diameter ranges from ca. 12–14 cm and, where whole profiles were preserved, these goblets stand ca. 10–12 cm tall. Only the exterior of one carinated goblet is wholly red slipped and burnished (Fig. 2.1); in the case of three other goblets (Fig. 2.2, 4, 6) the sides are red slipped and burnished only down to the carination and the bottom part of the vessel is not. Two specimens are not color treated in any way (Fig. 2.5, 7). This type bears resemblance to the closed carinated bowl with red slip on the whole vessel or above the carination, frequently found in tombs. It has been mentioned that some
of these bowls have vertical walls and cannot be distinguished from goblets (Peilstöcker 2003, 262–263). For instance, the carinated goblet (Fig. 2.5) appearing as fig. 5.42:8 in Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz (2002) was previously published in the 1987 preliminary report (Miron 1987, 55, fig. 11:13), where it was described as a bowl. This type is further described as a carinated bowl with a high ring base and a high side above the carination, made mostly of coarse material and lacking decoration, typical of the northern coastal area (Miron 1987, 55–56). Several of these bowls, both red slipped and not, were found during recent excavations at Kabri in loci belonging to the early phases of the palace (Fig. 2.8–9).

At Kabri, both types of goblets were found in various contexts and were deemed “safely…assigned to later stages of the MB IIB [i.e., MB II in the terminology used here]” (Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, 110). Peilstöcker (2003, 279), too, asserted that these forms do not appear before the MB II and seem to be more common in the later assemblages. Eight goblets retrieved from Locus 511 were initially assigned to Stratum 4 (Kempinski 2002a, 467), dating to transitional MB I–II, yet need to be re-dated to Stratum 3. This locus, which cuts into Stratum 4 Floor 510, sealing the tomb itself (Kempinski 2002b, 51, fig 4.44, 467), is the shaft to Tomb 498, which is assigned to Strata 4 and 3 (Kempinski 2002b, 467), and was thus obviously still in use in the final days of the tomb’s use. Locus 511 and the pottery retrieved from it should thus be dated to Strata 3 rather than 4. Since it has been suggested that these goblets were associated with pre-burial ceremonies (Kempinski and Scheftelowitz 2002, 43), it seems quite possible that the goblets found in the tomb’s shaft are remnants of the last funerary rite that took place in it.

Whole hemispherical “Kabri Goblets” and goblet sherds were found mostly in funerary contexts (Fig. 1.1–4 from Tomb 498; Fig. 1.5–10 from the shaft to Tomb 498); goblet
Sherds were found also in fill and on floors in residential Area C (Fig. 1.11–13), and in the collapse debris of Stratum 3 in the palace (Fig. 1.14–17). Notably, some goblets from floors in Area C come from Locus 431—listed as a wall in the list of loci (Kempinski 2002a, 466), but which is, in fact, a Stratum 3 floor containing numerous goblet and bowl sherds associated with funerary activity that took place in nearby Tomb 498 (Kempinski and Scheftelowitz 2002, 43, fig. 4.31).

Carinated goblets, considerably less frequent than the hemispherical ones, are found in similar contexts as the latter, at times side by side with them; however, as opposed to the hemispherical goblets, two examples of the carinated goblets were found in Tomb 984, the sealing of which is dated to the transition between MB I and MB II. It is possible, therefore, that this form begins to appear earlier than the hemispherical goblet.

**The Ancestry of the “Kabri Goblet”**

The deep ancestry of the goblets stems from the Syrian goblets of the Intermediate Bronze Age (henceforth IB), as indicated by the examples from Tell Mardikh/Ebla Phase IIIB1 and Royal Palace G, in which hundreds of goblets were found (Fig. 3.1–2; Matthiae 1981, 95, fig. 15; Mazzoni 1994, 249–253; Bunimovitz and Greenberg 2004, 26). Syrian-made goblets were imported also to the southern Levant during the IB, sparking local production of handmade goblets with incised decoration, often with several bands below the rim (Bunimovitz and Greenberg 2004, fig. 2).

Goblets proper are rather rare in the MB I ceramic tradition, with few examples in Megiddo Stratum XIIIA (Loud 1948, pl. 18: 5–6) and Ras el Ain/Aphek (Amiran 1969, pl. 28:1; Fig. 3.5–7 herein). The IB plain ware goblets were replaced very early in the MB I by compatible, yet slightly shorter, drinking forms: the hemispherical and carinated bowls. Examples can be found in the Gesher cemetery (Cohen and Bonfil 2007, figs. 5.9, 5.12:3) and in Kabri Tomb 1050 (Kempinski and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.22:10), which are non-slipped and fitted with flat bases, yet with no incisions under the rim.

More archaic traits were preserved in the MB I Levantine-style pottery repertoire at Tell el Dab‘a. A group of wheel-
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Locus</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Stratum/Date</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>498 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Strata 4–3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.28:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>498 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Strata 4–3</td>
<td>After Kempinski and Niemeier 1988, fig. 5.28:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>498 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Strata 4–3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.28:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>498 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Strata 4–3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.28:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski and Niemeier 1988, fig. 5.43:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>505 (fill)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>757 (fill)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>757 (fill)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>791 (second-floor debris)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>511 (tomb shaft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>505 (fill)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>984 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>757 (fill)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>791 (second-floor debris)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>984 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>984 (tomb)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Stratum 3</td>
<td>After Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.43:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>L. 2251</td>
<td>D-W</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>L. 2197</td>
<td>D-W</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Ebla</td>
<td>Mardikh IIB1 and Royal Palace G</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Matthiae 1981, 95, fig. 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Ebla</td>
<td>Mardikh IIB1 and Royal Palace G</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Matthiae 1981, 95, fig. 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Lachish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After Amiran 1969, pl. 22:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Lachish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After Amiran 1969, pl. 22:2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Megiddo</td>
<td>L. 5054</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>Stratum XIIIa</td>
<td>After Loud 1948: Pl. 16:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Megiddo</td>
<td>T. 5103</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>Stratum XIIIa</td>
<td>After Loud 1948: Pl. 18:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Ras el-Ani/ Aphek</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After Amiran 1969, pl. 35:10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Tell el-Dab'a</td>
<td>d1–c; MB IIA (^1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Aston 2004, pl. 13:68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Tell el-Dab'a</td>
<td>E/2–1; mid- to late MB IIA</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Aston 2004, pl. 210:823</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Tell el-Dab'a</td>
<td>E/2–1; mid- to late MB IIB</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Aston 2004, pl. 210:824</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Tell el-Dab'a</td>
<td>a/2; mid- to late MB IIB</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Aston 2004, pl. 210:825</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>Corridor assemblage, from renewed excavations; vessel (^{i}) Va. No. 2009-1</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Shalem 2009, fig. 13:3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Kabri</td>
<td>Locus 211, Basket 2149, Square B, Level II (following Shalem 2009: 32)</td>
<td></td>
<td>After Shalem 2009, fig. 13:3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Dates for Tell el-Dab’a follow Bietak and Höflmayer 2007, 15, fig. 2.
made bowls found there, defined as Deep Bowls with Simple Contours and Ring Bases (“Tiefen Nappelschalen mit Ringboden,” Group 214; Aston 2004, 195; Fig. 4.2–4 herein), comprises hemispherical vessels with a wheel-made base and decorative incised bands below the rim. In some cases, the upper part of the rim is red-slipped. This type probably evolved from an earlier form, dated to the mid- to late Middle Bronze Age (Group 21; Aston 2004, pl. 13:68–70; Fig. 4.1 herein) that had a handmade base. Stratigraphically vessels from Group 21 occur from the beginning of the Thirteenth Dynasty onward (mid- to late MB I). None of this type appears to be known from earlier periods (Aston 2004, 68).

Parallels to the carinated form of the Kabri cup can also be found in late MB I contexts in Tell el-Dab’a. Group 11 comprises “Carinated Bowls with Direct Rim and Flat or Ring Base” (“Knickwandschalen mit Stand- bzw. Ringboden,” Aston 2004, 60–61, pl. 7:30–32). These are often found in Middle Kingdom contexts, although only three rims were found at Tell el-Dab’a. Similar vessels have been found in late-Twelfth–early-Thirteenth Dynasty contexts at Dahshur, Harageh, Kahun, Lahun, Abydos, Armant, and Elephantine, and in Thirteenth Dynasty contexts at Lisht (Aston 2004, 60).

At the same time, undecorated deep bowls with incisions on the rim are rare in the mid- to late MB I assemblage from Canaan, and the somewhat similar forms of deep hemispherical bowls, often with a flat base or low ring base, are now red slipped (e.g., from Aphek [Beck 2000, fig. 10.4:2, Stratum A XVII; fig. 10.16:6, Stratum A XIva] and Megiddo [Loud 1948, pl. 9.9, Stratum XV]).

It is, in our opinion, significant to note that while there is no direct late MB I–MB II ceramic ancestor of the Kabri cup, all of the components used later in the MB II for its creation existed separately in both late MB I and early MB II examples of undecorated, deep hemispherical MB I bowls. These, therefore, could have been part of the inspiration for the MB II creation of the “Kabri cups.” One such example comes from Tomb 502 (Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheffelowitz 2002, fig. 5.20:1). Another comes from our 2009 excavation season within the palace (Yasur-Landa and Cline 2009). It was found in a rich late MB I deposit of pottery in an area previously thought by Kempinski and Niemeier to be a stairwell and now believed to be a basement/store-room. This assemblage comprised mostly storage jars, but also drinking vessels, including a spouted krater and four carinated bowls. A very deep bowl or goblet (Fig. 4.5) was also among these vessels. It is 12 cm in diameter and 10 cm tall, undecorated, and has a flat base and a simple rim that turns inward only slightly. Its body is slightly ovoid and it has a flat base. In general form, it preserves the much earlier Syrian goblet tradition.

Furthermore, the existence of vessels with an incised rim as a rare feature in the Middle Bronze repertoire of Kabri before the introduction of the “Kabri cups” may be seen in the rim of a non-slipped hemispherical bowl or goblet with three incisions found during an Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) salvage excavation in an area that may be the eastern boundary of the palace (Fig. 4.6). Its find context can be dated to the early part of the MB II by the discovery of a carinated bowl with strong carination and a ring base, and the absence of later forms (Shalem 2009, fig. 13:4).

In sum, the MB II “Kabri cup,” or goblet, seems to take its inspiration from both red-slipped MB I deep hemispherical bowls and MB I non-slipped, deep hemispherical bowls with incised decoration—they themselves a relic of a Syrian IB type. To this, the tall ring base, which became a common feature of MB II pottery of the southern Levant, was added, creating a distinct vessel type.

**THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE “KABRI GOBLET”**

During MB II, particularly in its later part, red slip—a very common trait of the mid- to late MB I—became increasingly more scarce. This phenomenon is especially conspicuous in Megiddo Stratum X, where red slip is limited mainly to juglets and platter bowls (Loud 1948, pls. 39–47). The drinking wares, mostly variants of carinated bowls, are either slipped with light hues, or are simply smoothed (Loud 1948, pl. 44:5–28). A hallmark of the late MB II is the popularity of carinated bowls with a sharp carination, flaring rim, and ring base or a tall “trumpet” base (Amiran 1969, pl. 27:20–24). These are almost never red slipped and become the dominant type of drinking vessel in Megiddo Strata XI and X.

The situation at Kabri is, however, very different. Carinated bowls with a sharp carination and a ring base or “trumpet” base, which are never red slipped, are considerably less frequent at Kabri than are goblets (e.g., Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheffelowitz 2002, fig. 5.23:4 from Tomb 984; figs. 5.28:5; 5.33:2 from Tomb 498; fig. 5.43:10 from Locus 511). Why would the Kabrites pay less attention to the fashionable carinated MB II drinking forms?

The consistent use of red slip as the preferred surface treatment of the “Kabri Goblets” may be seen as a deliberate archaism and an appeal to past forms and surface treatment of the MB I and early MB II. With the use of intramural multiple burials, used over many generations (as in the case of Tomb 498), it is very likely that people were exposed to complete vessels that were made one or two centuries before their time. The creation of the “Kabri Goblets” may be seen as a “retro” innovation: the combination of a hemispherical bowl and surface treatment typical of the past, together with
the addition of a tall ring base that was becoming trendy throughout the Levant in the MB II period. This innovation was accepted as it was well within the typological boundaries of what can be defined as a Canaanite kos. In addition, the users of this form had no doubt noticed the connection to the deep past seen in the red slip and round contour, so it is possible that it was thought by its purchasers to be a “traditional” Canaanite kos.

This innovative form was well accepted at Kabri itself, yet met with little enthusiasm even in nearby settlements, as indicated by the scant number of parallels for the hemispherical goblets from northern Israel and even in sites in the immediate vicinity of Kabri, such as Nahariya and Akko. Rim sherds of possible parallels to the “Kabri Goblets” were found at these sites (Peilstöcker 2003, 352, pl. 6.29.17 and Beeri 2008, 302, pl. 3:41 respectively). In addition, Beeri lists a specimen from Tel Zevat, Locus 214, (unpublished) and one from Tell el-Amar (lower Galilee; Beeri 2008, 229–230). Two additional straight-sided, simple, red-slipped and burnished rim sherds with incisions circling the rim from Tel Akko are denoted as goblets (Beeri 2008, 302 pl. 3: 41–42) and dated to Akko Stage 3—the end of MB I, contemporaneous with the transition from Stratum 4 to 3 at Kabri (Beeri 2008, 217). However, if they are indeed shown in true scale, one of these vessels seems too large to be a goblet.

The “Kabri Goblets” may be a deliberately local material culture trait, enhancing local identity among elites and non-elites. It may be no coincidence that, during the same MB II period, the Kabri elite made a deliberate choice to commission Aegean-style pictorial art to decorate the palace instead of choosing to adorn the palace with Syro-Canaanite art (Cline and Yasur-Landau 2007). To date, the miniature wall fresco and the frescoed floor found by Kempinski and Niemeier in the early 1990s and the figurative fresco and possible fragments of additional floor fresco found by us in 2009 attest to the active decision of Kabri rulers to differentiate themselves from their Canaanite counterparts in nearby polities, most importantly Hazor.

It has yet to be determined if the creation of the “Kabri Goblets” were the result of a similarly deliberate act of creating an independent identity, facilitated through the production of pottery in workshops controlled by the ruling elite.
Evidence of another form of differentiation—this time between participants of different social status—can be gleaned from the variance in goblet sizes. The best example for this is the hemispherical goblet assemblage from Locus 511 (Fig 1.5–10), possibly the remnants of a burial rite. There are two distinct goblet sizes here. We may explain this disparity by citing the banquet scene in Megiddo IV no. 160 (Loud 1939, pl. 32, no. 160c), where hierarchy is evident also from the size of the drinking vessel that the banqueter grasps (Yasur-Landau 2005b, 174).

Another indication that the “Kabri Goblet” was connected to notions of local identity stems from the fact that this innovative form did not outlive the Kabri polity. Immediately following the fall of the Kabri palace during late MB II, the form ceased to be manufactured. This is evident from the finds in Tomb 902 (Kempinski, Gershuny, and Scheftelowitz 2002, fig. 5.60–61; Bietak 2007, 272), belonging to early Late Bronze I and, therefore, postdating the fall of the palace. All of the drinking vessels in this tomb are carinated bowls with ring bases, a direct derivation of the common MB II types; none of them is red slipped.

The find contexts of the “Kabri Goblets” indicate that they were used by all strata of society, and for all types of feasts. It was used for consumption of drinks and no doubt in non-elite feasts in the house in Area C. It was offered for the use of the dead in the tombs of Areas B and C, and its discovery in the shaft of Tomb 498 (Locus 511) suggest that it was used for funerary feasts, perhaps a Marzeh in honor of the dead. And, it was also used in the Stratum 3 palace, uniting the elite and the non-elite in the use of a special type of ceramic drinking ware.

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391


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