

# The Canaanite Trade Network between the Shores of the Mediterranean Sea

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**Abstract**—The Canaanite civilization was one of the early great civilizations of the Near East, they influenced and been influenced from the civilizations of the ancient world especially the Egyptian and Mesopotamia civilizations. The development of the Canaanite trade started from the Chalcolithic Age to the Iron Age through the oldest trade route in the Middle East. This paper will focus on defining the Canaanites and from where did they come from and the meaning of the term Canaan and how the Ancient Manuscripts define the borders of the land of Canaan and this essay will describe the Canaanite trade route and their exported goods such as cedar wood, and pottery.

**Keywords**—Canaan, cedar, Djahy, pottery, Retjenu, trade.

## I. BACKGROUND

THE geographical location of the Canaanites cities was around the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in North Africa. This geographical location brought ships as an effective means of transport and eventual export goods and in the manufacture of vessels and the establishment of ports and harbors on the shores of the Mediterranean sometime during the third millennium BC, and this was clear from ancient Egyptian manuscripts.

The Canaanites had more like a group of "city kingdoms" and were expert sailors and major merchants and colonists. They eventually became the most famous sailor of the ancient world, making their way as far as the Atlantic.

## II. THE CANAANITES AND THEIR ORIGIN

According to estimates of historical studies [1]-[5], successive waves of migration occurred in the Arabian Peninsula about seven thousand years ago [6]. Where nomadic tribes living in the arid desert moved from time to time in search of a land more generous and prosperous, so they crossed the Fertile Crescent region, which includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan and part of them settled in the land of Palestine before this known name as it was called by "the land of Canaan". This migration was known as the "Canaanite" migration, by tracing their traces and the antiquities of their ancient major cities which were on the coastline of the Mediterranean, some colonies reaching the Western Mediterranean. These migratory Canaanite tribes, included the Phoenicians settled in the western region of the Fertile Crescent, located between the Mediterranean Sea to the

west, the Jordan Valley and the mountains of Lebanon to the east, to the Negev Desert to the south, to the "İskenderun" to the north.

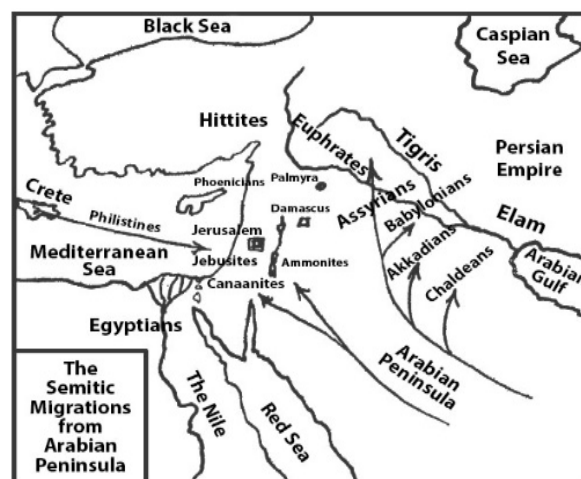


Fig. 1 Arab Canaanite migrations from the Arabian Peninsula which is considered one of the oldest migrations known to date [7]

Canaan was first called on the coast and west of current Palestine and later became the recognized geographical name of the land of Palestine and a large part of Syria [8]. Professor Robinson said that the name Canaan is sometimes used as an inclusive term and it distinguishes the people of Palestine who have inhabited it since ancient times, and it also appears to include the Phoenicians [9].

## III. THE MEANING OF THE TERM "CANAAN"

The Canaanites were called by this name because the word originated from the word Khanna, which is derived from the Akkadian language, which means low, and they were called by this name because they inhabited lowland sites.

## IV. THE TERM OF CANAAN IN ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS

The term "Canaanites" serves as an ethnic catch-all term covering various indigenous populations both settled, the first reference to naming Syria and Palestine land as the term "Canaan" was found in:

### A. Ebla Tablets (2500 – 2200 BC)

Canaan and its God were referred to in the Ebla tablets dating back to 2350 BC in the archives of Tell Mardikh in Syria when the deity Dagon was mentioned with the title "Lord of "Ga-na-na" [11] which suggests that the Eblaites

were conscious of Canaan as an entity by 2500 BC.



Fig. 2 The land of Canaan was described as "the land between", as it served as the main point of contact for Egypt in the south and Mesopotamia in the north [10]

During the Early Bronze Age, Ancient Egypt called the people of Canaan with four names: Hurio Sho (i.e., the 'Asiatics' who dwell in the sand), Minito, Otio, and Amo and these names remained until the Fifth Egyptian Dynasty.

The Egyptian New Kingdom mentioned numerous military campaigns conducted in "Ka-na-na" and as "Kn'n" is found on coins from Phoenicia in the last half of the first millennium and it first appeared in the Greek writings of Hecataeus as "Khna".

Canaan had a significant geopolitical importance in the Late Bronze Age (The Amarna period) as the area where the interests of the Egyptian, the Hittite, the Mitanni and the Assyrian Empires converged.

#### B. Mari Letters (2000 BC)<sup>1</sup>

These letters were found in 1973 in the ruins of Mari, an Assyrian outpost at that time in Syria, additional unpublished references to "Kinahnu" in the Mari letters refer to the same episode. One of these letters was from Mutu-bisir to Shamshi-Adad I of the Old Assyrian Empire, translated as: "It is in Rahisum that the brigands and the Canaanites (Kinahnu) are situated" [5, p.15].

#### C. Alalakh Texts

The inscription on the Statue of Idrimi from Alalakh<sup>2</sup> (in modern Syria) is written in the Akkadian cuneiform, describing how he was forced into exile and his family fled from Yamhad (Aleppo) and traveled and sought refuge in the land of Canaan and lived there.

Other references in the Alalakh texts mention Canaan as [12, p.112]:

- AT181, A list of Apiru people with their origins, all are towns, except for Canaan.
- AT188, A list of Muskenu people with their origins, all

<sup>1</sup> The period of Amorite ascendancy is vividly mirrored in the Mari Letters, a great archive of royal correspondence found at the site of Mari, near the modern frontier with Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> Alalakh, now known as Tell Atchana, is an archaeological site in the Hatay Province. During the Bronze Age, Alalakh was a city-state and the seat of kings who ruled the Amuq Plain.

are towns, except for three lands including Canaan.



Fig. 3 The Statue of Idrimi - British Museum, London

#### D. Amarna Letters

Other references to Canaanites are also found in the Amarna letters of Pharaoh Akhenaten which dates back to 1350 BC. Some of these letters were sent by governors and princes of Canaan to their Egyptian overlord Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) [12, p.112] such as: Letter EA 148 which is from Abimilku to the Pharaoh and Letter EA 151 which is from Abimilku to the Pharaoh. But the term "Canaanites" was not the only expression with which the people of Palestine and Syria were known throughout in Ancient Manuscripts. It was named with many names given by the neighboring peoples and mentioned in historical archaeological documents such as in ancient Egyptian records, the land of Canaan (Syria-Palestinian) region is subdivided into three geographical areas named Djahy, Remenen, and Retjenu.

#### V. RETJENU

The first Egyptian military campaign in the Levant dated during the reign of King Senusret III, and that was between 1878-1839 BC. This campaign recorded on the Sebek-khu Stele, which mentioned the victory of the Egyptians over the people of the Retjenu, which is considered the earliest attestation of the name; the Stele mentioned that: "His Majesty proceeded northward to overthrow the Asiatics. His Majesty reached a foreign country of which the name was Sekmem (...) Then Sekmem fell, together with the wretched Retjenu" [13].

Retjenu land was covered the region from the Negev desert north to the Orontes River in the north of Lebanon. The borders of Retjenu shifted with time, but it generally consisted of three regions. The southernmost was Djahy, which had the same boundaries as Canaan [14, p.47] and from the north there was the land of the Amorites.

The name "Retjenu" also occurs in the Tale of Sinuhe, inscribed on a piece of limestone in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC and also the Retjenu people are depicted in the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty tomb

of Rekhmire (TT100). Overall, the Retjenu people appeared in numerous Egyptian inscriptions [15].



Fig. 4 The Sebek-khu Stele

## VI. DJAHY

“Djahy” was named by the Egyptians for northern Retjenu [12] and it covered from Ashkelon to Lebanon and inland as far as Galilee [14, p.47]. It was mentioned many times in the battles with Kadesh of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties of Egypt.



Fig. 5 Sea Peoples in conflict with the Egyptians in the battle of Djahy [16]

In the eighth year of pharaoh Ramesses III about 1178 BC, the battle of Djahy occurred on the eastern borders of the Egyptian Empire in Djahy<sup>3</sup> (modern-day southern Lebanon) to protect the Egyptian land from the invasion of the Sea Peoples.

Djahy is also mentioned in the Harris Papyrus, from the

<sup>3</sup> Almost all that we know about the battle comes from the mortuary temple of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu. The description of the battle and prisoners is well documented on temple walls where we also find the longest hieroglyphic inscription known to us. Temple reliefs feature many bound prisoners defeated in battle.

middle of the twelfth century, in which Ramesses III said that he built a temple for Amun in Djahy region of Canaan.

## VII. THE BORDERS OF THE LAND OF CANAAN

The land of Canaan covered the area of the Southern Levant and the southwestern strip of the Fertile Crescent. The borders of the land of Canaan as described in Egyptian ancient sources such as:

### A. *Annals of Thutmose III*

Around 1437 BC, Thutmose III started to describe in his annals the story of his campaigns in Syria and Palestine on the walls inscriptions of the great chamber housing the "holy of holies" at the great Karnak Temple of Amun. The wall inscriptions are 25 meters in length and 12 meters wide and presenting the largest and most detailed records concerning the military exploits of all Egyptian Kings [17].

The so-called Annals of Thutmose III are composed of numerous inscriptions of ancient Egyptian military records gathered from the 18th Dynasty campaigns of Thutmose III's armies in the land of Canaan (Syro-Palestine), covering his regnal years from year 22 (1458 BC) to year 42 (1438 BC) [18].



Fig. 6 Inscription of the Annals of Thutmose III in the Louvre Museum in France

### B. *Papyrus Anastasi I*

Papyrus Anastasi I is an ancient Egyptian papyrus containing a satirical text during the Ramesside Period (i.e., Nineteenth and Twentieth dynasties). Hori, an army scribe, wrote the papyrus to his fellow Amenemope, mentioned the troubles which might beset a traveler during travelling the Mediterranean coast as far north as Lebanon.

This papyrus describes the Canaanite region in great detail, starting from the Lebanese coast and extending beyond Jaffa to Gaza City, at the end of the land of Canaan as it contains all the information about towns in Syria-Palestine during the New Kingdom [19]. It shows that during the ancient Middle East, the territory of Canaan extended from Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains in the north, to the Negev desert to the south. From east to west, the land of Canaan was bordered by the natural boundaries of the Ard as-Sawwan Desert in modern-day Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea.





Fig. 7 Papyrus Anastasi I in the British museum, number EA10247, 4

### VIII. THE STATES AND CITIES OF CANAAN

The Canaanites migrated from the Arabian Peninsula and settled in Palestine and built around 200 cities and many temples and forts based on Egyptian archeological discoveries during the mid-third millennium BC.

While some other researchers [20] confirmed that the presence of the Canaanites dates back to seven thousand years ago by tracing the Canaanite antiquities in their ancient cities such as their most ancient city "Jericho" that still remains to our day which is considered the most ancient city on earth; also, there are many cities and villages which still remain to our day such as Ashdod, Acre, Gaza, Al-Majdal, Jaffa, Ashkelon and Beit She'an [21] and some of their cities were demolished. However, there is a complete agreement that the Canaanites were the first who inhabited this region among the ancient nations and were the first who established a civilization in Palestine [22].



Fig. 8 The Canaanite city dating back to the second millennium BC at present Ras Shamra near the Mediterranean coast of Syria

The third millennium BC in Canaan was determined because it chronicles a new phase when the first Egyptian military campaigns began against the Canaanite cities, and these cities were mentioned in the Amarna Letters and were divided into:

- First, Syria's coastal cities: Ras Shamra, Ugarit, Arwad.
- Second, Lebanon's coastal cities: Byblos (Jbeil), Beirut, Sidon, Tyre.

- Third, the coastal cities of Palestine: Acre, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Jatt (mentioned in the name of Gentoo), Gaza (mentioned in the name of Gato).
- Fourth, the Inland city of Palestine and East Jordan: Kadesh, Hazor, Beit She'an (Bisan), Shechem (Nablus), Beit El, Gibeon, Jericho (which had a civilization 3,000 years before the Canaanites), Beit Shams, Bethlehem, Megiddo, Gezer, Hebron, Ajloun, Beersheba, Jarrar, Jebus (Ur Salem) [23].

Many ancient Egyptian archeological records were describing many Canaanite countries and cities during describing the relationship between Egypt and Canaan which began around the end of the fifth millennium and came to an end sometime during the second dynasty when it ceased altogether [24].

The Egyptians made many invasions on Canaan during the fifth and sixth dynasties and they ruled the land of Canaan (Syria and Palestine) politically and economically in the thirteenth dynasty in the second millennium BC and Canaanite cities were mentioned in Egyptian Execration texts dating back to the nineteenth century BC.



Fig. 9 Two Execration Statues were found in Canaan and the Canaanite cities of Mount Ashkelon, Nablus, Jerusalem, Kadesh, Lech, and Acre

The Execration texts also referred to as prescription lists [25] which are ancient Egyptian hieratic texts, listing the enemies of the pharaoh, most often enemies of the Egyptian Kingdom, or troublesome foreign neighbors [26] and the discovered execration texts dated back to the late Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BC) up into the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BC).

In the late sixteenth century BC, most of the Canaanite kingdoms were completely submissive of Egyptian sovereignty. This is also supported by the archaeological discoveries in Ras Al-Shamra, Byblos and Megiddo.

The largest part of the Annals of Thutmose III lists in the Karnak and especially the inscription that records the "contributions" describes the regular deliveries from the conquered territories in Syria-Palestine and Nubia. The Syria-Palestinian region is subdivided into three geographical areas named Djahy, Remenen<sup>4</sup>, and Retjenu. All three have a vague meaning and cannot be regarded as territories with strictly defined boundaries.

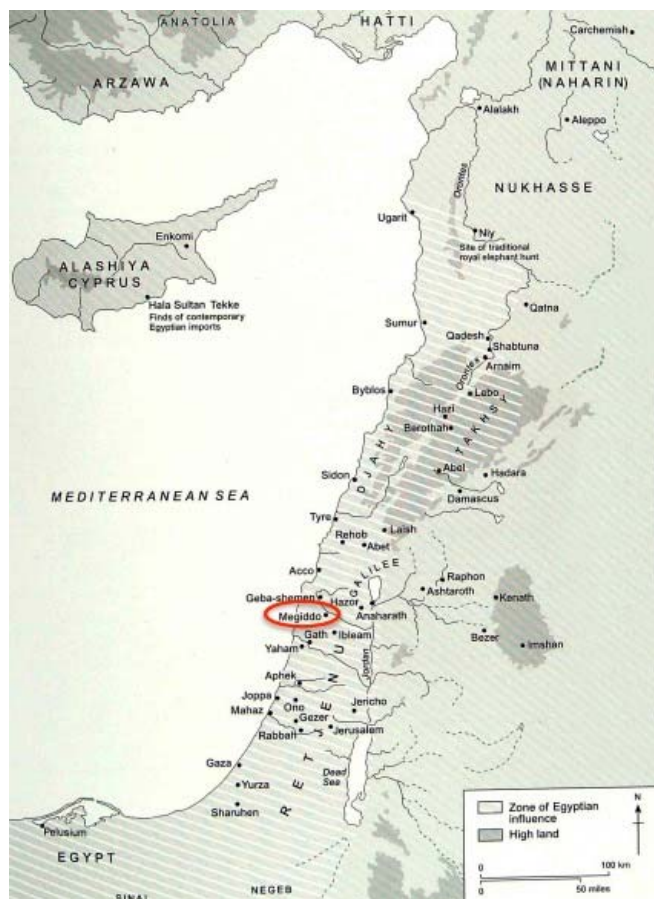


Fig. 10 Map showing the cities mentioned in the annals of Thutmose III [27]

In the context of the Annals, Djahy can be roughly identified with Palestine. The deliveries of this region to Egypt appear for the first time in year 35 and thereafter nearly on an

<sup>4</sup> The name is recorded in Ancient Egyptian as Rmn, where Rmn stood for Canaanite Land.

annual basis. The short passages include only items of natural produce, such as cereals, moringa oil, incense, wine, and honey, with no indication of their amounts [28].

The inscription mentions in year 22 the royal domains of Megiddo, which contributed a harvest of many thousands of tons of cereals. The name Remenen denoted Lebanon, though its geographical limits cannot be defined with certainty.

The third Syria-Palestinian geographical name occurring in the Annals, Retjenu, included, without doubt, a large part of the Syrian territory. However, the definition of the southern limits of this region, and accordingly its relation to Djahy and Remenen, remains problematic.

The lists of captive cities in Upper Retjenu mentioned in the inscriptions carved on the sixth and seventh pylons of the Karnak Temple included Palestinian localities, such as Hazor, Akko Megiddo, and Joppa. But it indicated that Djahy was not a different territory but overlapped or was identical with the southern provinces of Retjenu. The contributions of Retjenu are called jaw, the term that denoted the items sent by independent countries.

At the time of Al-Amarna in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC, Canaan was completely under the control of the Egyptian kingdom. Therefore, the Amarna letters mention the names of Canaanite cities, and it is clear from the letters also that the whole region was often ruled by foreign rulers' subordinate to the Egyptian kingdom.

#### IX. CANAANITE TRADE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA FROM THE CHALCOLITHIC PERIOD (4500-3500 BC) UNTIL THE IRON AGE (1000 BC)

The Canaanite land always has been crossed by many travel and trade routes. Along these roads, ideas and information were exchanged along with goods and services, thus opening Canaan to influences from throughout the civilizations of the ancient world especially the Egyptian and Mesopotamia civilizations.

The maritime trade in Canaan already existed in the Chalcolithic period (4500-3500 BC) [31] and around the second millennium BC the maritime trade routes are even more abundant. These sources attest to the exploits and conquests of the ruling powers over the Levant.

Many ancient sources describe the ancient sea trade, the ships, the traded goods, and more particularly, the exploitation of forests of the hinterland and the export of timber from the Levant to Ancient Egypt in the south and to the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires in the East.

The Canaanite or Phoenicia ancient nation has a narrow country that skirted the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea in North Africa. This geography itself brought on the use of water vessels as a main good for transportation and eventually exportation.

In the late second millennium BC, the Aegean domination of the Mediterranean ended, allowing the Phoenician Canaanites to expand their maritime trade, and their ships, and then their colonies, were distributed throughout the Mediterranean. This predates the appearance of the Greek and Roman navies on the Mediterranean as these societies would



not come into existence until many years later. At this time, and appear to have enjoyed unfettered dominion on the sea. the Canaanites were conducting large amounts of sea-trade



Fig. 11 Canaanite which are labeled by “Chiefs of Retjenu” bringing presents to Thutmose III in the tomb of Rekhmire dated back to 1450 BC [29]

There is a clear description about the Canaanite land and their trade in the annals of Thutmose III (1490 - 1436 BC) the land, as well as of the goods imported to Egypt, their shipping, and the missions to fetch them.

The shipping and nature of the goods traded in the second millennium BC are represented on iconographic sources, such as those in the Qenamun Tomb, dated to the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty and depicting seagoing ships with Canaanite traders unloading goods on Egyptian land.

Another important iconographic source is the bas-relief dated back to 1294 – 1279 BC on the façade of the Temple of Seti I on the north wall of the Temple of Amun at Karnak. This wall relief shows dignitaries Canaanite from Jubal cutting wood to be offered to Seti I and these iconographic representations testify to the commercial transactions between the Canaanites in Levant and Ancient Egypt.

#### X. THE CANAANITE TRADE ROUTE

The Sea Route or the Philistine Street is one of the oldest and most important trade routes in the Middle East. It is a new Latin name for the road - which dates back to the early Bronze Age - when it was called "Via Maris," which means "the way of the sea" [33].

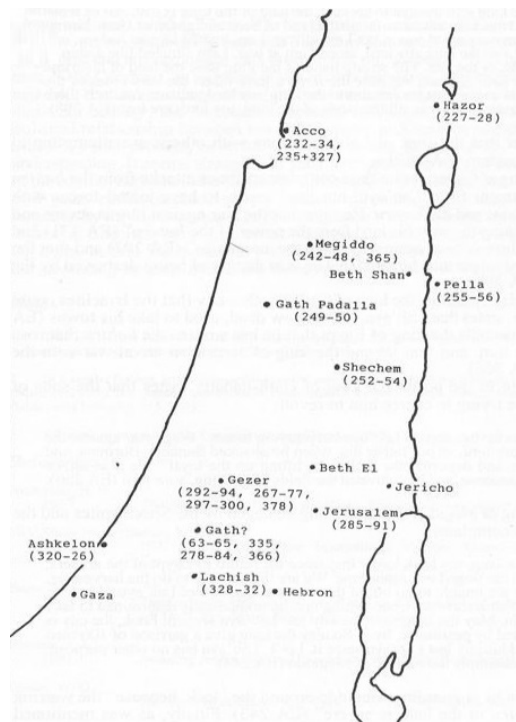


Fig. 12 Cities of ancient Canaan, with the numbers of Amarna Letters originating at each city, indicated in parentheses [30]



Fig. 13 Early scenes of Canaanite ships in the tomb of Kenamun (TT. 162; Amenhotep III)

The road was primarily called the "Palestinian Road", as a reference to the travel route that passes through the Philistine plains, which today form the southern coastal part of historic Palestine, especially the Gaza Strip. This road was considered

alongside the Kings Road, one of the main roads linking Ancient Egypt with the Levant, Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and it crossed other trade routes to travel between Europe and Africa, or between Asia and Africa.

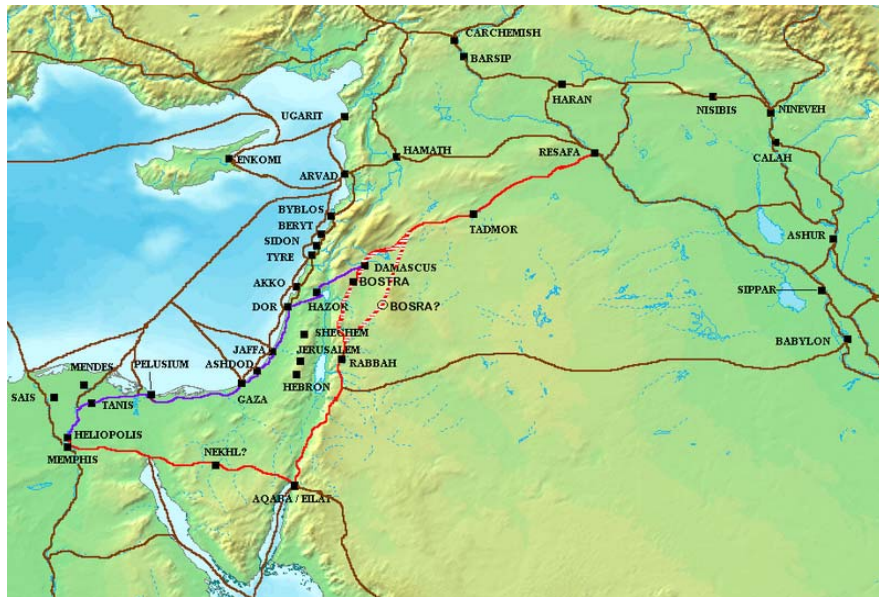


Fig. 14 The Via Maris trade route in purple, King's Highway in red, and other ancient Levantine trade routes in brown dated back to 1300 BC [32]

The road starts from an area near Qantara Sharq in Egypt, turns east towards Farma, then follows the northern coastal line of Sinai and turns towards Al-Arish and then Rafah. From there it begins along the Canaanite coast, passing through Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Jaffa until it branches in Tantara - near Hadera - into two roads, the first continues along the Mediterranean coast, and the second turns east towards Marj bin Amer, which crosses it until it reaches the city of Tiberias and its lake, then it turns east to cross the Jordan River towards the Golan Heights and Damascus in Syria. From there, travelers could continue traveling along the royal road until it reaches the Euphrates, or continue northward toward Anatolia [34].

#### XI. THE EXPORTED GOODS

The Canaanites had a distinctive civilization that could be inferred from the antiquities that were found. They built their cities and surrounded them with protective walls, and they built the houses with stones obtained from the mountains scattered in their lands. They practiced agriculture, especially the cultivation of olives, and made clay pots which they used in their food, drink and life affairs.

They were famous for manufacturing the fabric from which they made their clothes. They enacted laws to organize dealing among themselves and among themselves and others. They invented the alphabet and invented the writing and spread it through their country.

##### A. Cedar Wood

Early Egyptian indicators prove the important role played by the Levant in antiquity. Indeed, pharaohs of the Old and Middle Kingdoms imported wood from the region (mainly from the area of modern Lebanon) to use in the building of ships and furniture.



Fig. 15 Female cone showing flecks of resin

Cedar wood was particularly prized for the construction of sacred vessels, and cedar resin was highly sought after for embalming in mummification. Other valuable goods which commonly appeared in the hulls of their trading vessels included amber (a fossilized tree resin) and metals such as copper, British tin, and Spanish silver. The earliest of these impacts was found in archaeological records at the temple of Hierakonpolis in Egypt. The archaeologist Michael Hoffman was digging near that city's known temple which itself was quite old, dating back to 3100 BC the cedar pillars for this temple, proof of a major trade between the Canaanites and Egyptians.

Canaan and its affiliated cities reached the height of their commercial glory in the thirteenth century BC, as their maritime communications included the regions of the entire ancient world, and their trade reached a great degree. That was not an isolated incident becomes evident when we note also that the "newer" temple in Hierakonpolis was where Narmer's



Palette was found. King Narmer is often credited with unifying Egypt and greatly expanding trade between Egypt and other countries. Pottery seals stamped with the name of Narmer were found in the area south of Tyre [35].

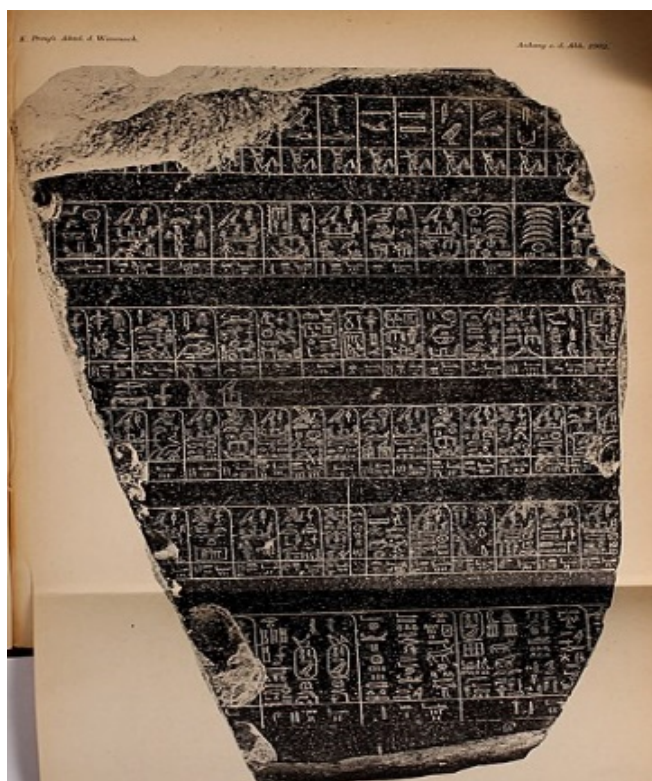


Fig. 16 The Palermo Stone, the fragment of the Egyptian Royal Annals housed in Palermo, Italy

The Palermo Stone mentions that King Senefru (2650-2600 BC) send ships to import high-quality cedar wood from Jbeil "Byblos" by bringing forty ships laden with cedar" in 2600 BC and also scribes were ordered to record on the stone the great events that happened during his reign. Some of these cedar logs can still be seen in the pyramid of Senefru "Bent Pyramid" in Dahshur. Also, there are cedar logs in the pyramid of Sahure, the first pyramid built in the Abu Sir Tombs complex in Egypt. Sahure was the second pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty, around 2480 BC [36].

The pyramid of Sahure is part of a large funerary complex that includes a temple on the bank of Lake Abu Sir, and a passage from this temple to another high temple located opposite the main pyramid and the pyramid of the spiritual chapel of the king's ka spirit. The complex was known in ancient Egypt as the "Shorouk Rouh al-Ba of Sahure."

On the north half of the corridor's east wall of Sahure pyramid, there is a relief describing the king and his court watching the departure of twelve sea-going vessels to ports of the cities and kingdoms of Canaan in Syria and Palestine [37].

In the south-half, another scene describes the king and his court awaiting the arrival of ships full of cargo and several Asiatics, which are not prisoners but commercial men or diplomatic representatives.

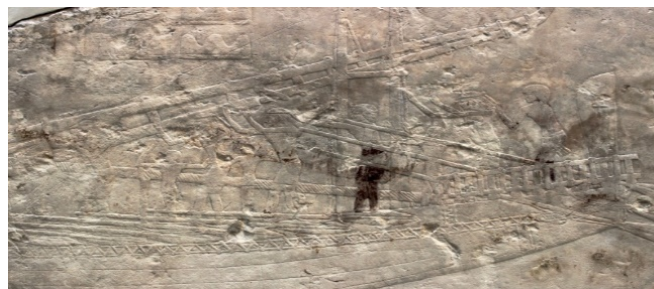


Fig. 17 Transverse corridor relief depicting a returning naval expedition. Image from Neues Museum - Berlin, Germany

The cedar trade was vital for the Egyptians. However, during unsettled conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean world, commercial exchanges between Byblos and Egypt were brought to an end.

In the latter part of the third millennium BC, one scribe described this when the trade was temporarily interrupted. He complained of the insecurity, the high cost of living, the flooding of the Nile, the inability to till the land, brigandage, disease and that all trade had stopped. He concluded his complaint: "Today no one sails north to Byblos any more. How will we get cedar for our mummies?" [38]



Fig. 18 Ipuwer Papyrus (A 344) mentioning the first hungry revolution that occurred in history, where the Egyptians and Canaanites suffered from it [39]

### B. Pottery



Fig. 19 Narmer serekh on pottery sherd from Nahal Tillah (Canaan) showing stylized catfish and absence of chisel [41]

The pottery sherd was found on a large circular platform of



a storage silo on the Halif Terrace dated back to 3000 BCE, mineralogical studies conducted on the sherd conclude that it is a fragment of a wine jar that had been imported from the Nile valley to Canaan [40].

Extensive parts of the inscription the Annals of Thutmose III are dedicated to the constant flow of peoples, animals, agricultural products, raw materials, and artifacts that reached Egypt as gifts, dues, booty, or even trade goods from foreign countries.

The diplomatic gifts recorded in the Annals include raw materials mostly of a precious character, such as silver, lapis lazuli, and semiprecious stones, as well as copper, lead, wood, horses, exotic animals, and metal vessels.

## XII. CONCLUSION

This study proved from ancient Egyptian manuscripts that maritime trade in Canaan had already existed since the Chalcolithic age (4500-3500 BC) and the Canaanites had more like a group of "city kingdoms" and were expert sailors and major merchants and colonists. They eventually became the most famous sailor of the ancient world, making their way as far as the Atlantic. Also, what the critical role that Canaan played in antiquity and how the pharaohs of the Old and Middle Kingdoms imported wood from the region (mainly from modern Lebanon) for use in shipbuilding and furniture and building sacred vessels. This study proved also how cedar resin important to the ancient Egyptians for use in embalming.

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