

A MIDDLE BRONZE II ALABASTRON FROM TELL ES-SULTAN/JERICHO AND A SYRO-PALESTINIAN CLASS OF ALABASTER VESSELS

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In the four seasons of renewed excavations (1997-2000) at Tell es-Sultan, ancient Jericho¹, one of the most significant results has been the identification of a Middle Bronze Age Lower Town to the south of the tell in Area A. The main occupation phase of Area A dates from Middle Bronze II (c. 1800-1650 BC) and it consists of what is thought to be a military fort (Fortress A1) and of a residential quarter (the main building of which is House A2)². Fortress A1 was probably built towards the end of Middle Bronze I (c. 2000-1800 BC); the whole area was then destroyed at the beginning of Middle Bronze III (c. 1650-1550 BC) for the construction of the last defensive rampart of the site³. In 1999, in a fill of collapsed mudbricks (F.177) sealing an outer surface (floor L.503) between Fortress A1 and House A2, was found *alabastron* TS.99.A.56, associated with a Middle Bronze II pottery horizon (fig. 1)⁴.

The vessel, made of whitish alabaster⁵, has rounded base, piriform body and broken flaring neck with a groove at its base (figs. 2-3)⁶. A dating from the Middle Bronze II period is assured not only by the retrieval context, but also by comparative materials (similar either typologically and for their dimensions).

Previous excavations at Tell es-Sultan unearthed only few comparable specimens on the tell, while the majority of them comes from tombs located to the north and north-west of the site. All the alabaster vessels from the mound were retrieved by Kenyon in Squares HII-III-VI, where, on the eastern side overlooking the spring, it was excavated the most significant Middle Bronze Age stratigraphic sequence on the site⁷. A

¹ The Jericho Expedition, directed by Lorenzo Nigro, Hamdan Taha and the Author, is a joint project sponsored by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities, Rome University «La Sapienza» and the Italian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of the University and Scientific and Technological Research.

² For the Middle Bronze II phases of Area A see Marchetti, Nigro 1998: 125-135, figs. 4: 8, 15; 2000: 199-216, figs. 5: 5-9; Marchetti, Nigro, Sarie' 1998: 134-138, fig. 15; Marchetti, Nigro, Taha in press: fig. 17. Concerning other residential units (not drawn in fig. 1 here), House A3 belongs to a later phase than A2, while A4 has been identified to the south of A1 in 1999.

³ For the chronological framework see Marchetti, Nigro 1998: 13-14, 145-154; 2000: 8-9, table 1; Middle Bronze I-III roughly corresponds to Albright's Middle Bronze IIA-C.

⁴ For the ceramic assemblage of the Middle Bronze II phases in Area A see Marchetti, Nigro 1998: 126-130, fig. 4: 20-23; 2000: 200-202, figs. 5: 44-51; Marchetti, Nigro, Sarie' 1998: 137-138, figs. 20-21; Marchetti, Nigro, Taha in press: figs. 23-24.

⁵ As far as the material is concerned, a distinction is usually made between calcite and gypsum (Ben-Dor 1944: 94-95 and Dajani 1962: 67-69 agree on the difference between calcite, i.e. calcium carbonate, allegedly of Egyptian origin, and gypsum, calcium sulphate of Palestinian origin); see also Warren 1969: 125-126, 128, 132; Casanova 1991: 11-17; Lilyquist 1996: 135-144. In fact Aston 1994: 42-51, pl. 10 convincingly shows that calcite was never used for stone vessels, the main differences lying between travertine and alabaster (which consists "of a fine-grained granular aggregate of gypsum", *ibid.*, p. 47, which is not suitable for containing liquids and can thus only contain solid or semi-liquid substances). Although TS.99.A.56 is made of alabaster in Aston's terms, the label "alabaster" is used throughout the present paper for both kinds of stone.

⁶ The object is 7.8 cm high and its maximum diameter is 4.6 cm; it comes from square AtIV12, operation 4c.

⁷ See Dorrell 1983: 566, Type N; see also *ibid.*, pp. 563, 565 for a brief discussion of the type.

whole specimen can be compared with TS.99.A.56, although it has an elongated flaring neck with no groove⁸; its archaeological context is significant, since it comes from a house of “phase xlv”⁹, dating from the latter part of Middle Bronze II, like operations 4d-c in Area A.

Several *alabastra* with ovoid body have been found in the Middle Bronze II-III multiple burials of the necropolis¹⁰. Although many specimens are similar to that with simple neck found in Squares HII-III-VI¹¹, the closest comparisons for TS.99.A.56 are those with a groove at the base of the neck¹². Specimens with a ribbed rim can perhaps represent the prototype for TS.99.A.56, the groove and overlying ridge of which being in such case part of the first and lowermost ribbing of the rim¹³. It is very likely that all these vessels were produced locally, as already noted by Ben-Dor and Kenyon¹⁴.

In Palestine one of the most important group of Middle Bronze Age *alabastra* comes from Tell el-^cAjjul/Sharuh, where several ovoid vessels with plain flaring neck have been found¹⁵. Specimens with ribbed rim are rarely attested to in Palestine¹⁶. In the Northern Levant both types are documented in contexts of the second half of the Middle

⁸ Dorrell 1983: 566, no. 1558, fig. 232.22.

⁹ Kenyon 1981: pl. 333b. In 1992 some illegal Israeli excavations were carried on to the south of Trench I: an alabaster vessel with flaring neck was said to have been “found on the <EB III> city wall”: in the light of the results obtained in Areas C and B in 1997 (Marchetti, Nigro 1998: 104-105, 141-142, figs. 4: 39, 44) it probably means that the piece came from the fill of the Middle Bronze Age I-II rampart; the vessel was published by Sh. Riklin, Jericho (Tell es-Sultan): *ESI* 15 (1996), p. 70, fig. 69.

¹⁰ The pottery materials of the tombs were divided by Kenyon into five main typological groups (for a listing of which see Kenyon 1965: 173-176), which however do not offer a chronological reference as useful as it may seem within the Middle Bronze II-III periods. See Kenyon 1960: 293-296; 1965: 197-199 for the distribution of the alabaster vessels within the tomb groups.

¹¹ Kenyon 1960: figs. 118: 12, 144: 1, 171: 1-2, 10; 1965: figs. 100: 2, 11, 16, 23, 171: 6, 179: 24. Alabaster vessels of similar shape were also found in Tombs 9 and 31 of Garstang’s excavations (Ben-Dor 1944: 103-104, type D “ovoid flasks”, nos. D1-7, pl. XXII: 7; Garstang 1932: pl. XXX: 14).

¹² Kenyon 1960: figs. 118: 5 (Tomb G37), 14-15 (B35), 187: 3 (G1), 6 (H6), 18-19 (H18); 1965: figs. 100: 1 (B48), 10 (J54), 154: 3-4, 10, 171: 5, 8 (B51), 179: 9 (A134), 14 (J20). See also the specimens with a marked shoulder: Kenyon 1960: figs. 118: 4,7 (G37), 171: 6 (J12), 187: 13 (H11); 1965: fig. 179: 1-5 (P17), 15 (J20).

¹³ See Kenyon 1965: fig. 171: 3 (B51); for a complete specimen, but with flat base, see *ibid.*, fig. 154: 2, pl. XVI: 1 (J14).

¹⁴ Ben-Dor started his observations from the discovery of unfinished alabaster juglets at Tell el-Husn/Beth Shan (1944: 97-98, pl. XXIII: 5-7); gypsum deposits near Jericho would have been located “round the Lisan, at Jebel Usdum, at Ras ez-Zuweira and in the valley of Wadi Hesa” (Ben-Dor 1944: 95). Kenyon 1957: 252 writes on the Jericho vessels: “The alabaster bowls and juglets are made of local stone, possibly from near Beisan, though whether the actual vessels were made at Beisan or more locally we do not know”.

¹⁵ Petrie 1931: 8-9, pls. XXIV top right, XXV: 17, 23; 1934: 12, pls. XXIV below, XXXVIII: 31-35 (nos. 31 and 33 are dated by Petrie from the XV Dynasty and no. 35 from the XVI); Petrie et al. 1952: 17-18, *sub* 49, nos. 6, 9-11, pl. XIX: 6, 9-11 (the latter with slightly flattened bases); Ben-Dor 1944: 98, D8; Stewart 1974: 48-49 for a list of Middle Bronze Age alabaster vessels; for recent pictures of the same materials see Lilyquist 1996: pls. 4: 5-6, 5: 2 center. Tomb 1416 of the Courtyard Cemetery, from which comes an alabaster vessel with flaring neck (Tufnell 1962: 20, 36, no. 65, fig. 14: 65), actually belongs to Tufnell’s Group 6 (dating from Middle Bronze III) and is thus later than the other tombs in the cemetery, which date from Middle Bronze I. Petrie 1934: pl. XXXVIII: 31, 33, 35 respectively come from tombs 1502, 457 and 1546 (see *ibid.*, pls. 1502, LXI left for the first two and right for the third one), correlated by the excavator with Dynasties XVI-XV in Egypt; Petrie 1931: pl. XXV: 17, 23 respectively come from rooms AW and AP (*ibid.*, pl. LIV; see also Kempinski 1983: plan 5), belonging to stratum II, which is very likely to date from Middle Bronze III, although a slightly later dating has also been suggested (Stewart 1974; Kempinski 1983: 132-135; see Nigro 1994: 112-113, 168-169 for an updated discussion of the chronology of the site).

¹⁶ See for example an *alabastron* from Gezer: Macalister 1912: 125, pl. XLII: 9 from “Cave 28 II”, containing Middle Bronze II-III materials (for which see *ibid.*, pp. 111-141).

Bronze Age: that with plain flaring neck is attested to at Beirut and Jebeil/Byblos¹⁷, while the ribbed type at Ras Shamra/Ugarit¹⁸. The two types are also known in Northern Inner Syria at Tell Atchana/Alalakh and at Tell Mardikh/Ebla from contexts also dating from the latter half of the Middle Bronze Age¹⁹. In Egypt the type with ribbed rim is attested to since the XII Dynasty, thus slightly earlier than the above mentioned contexts²⁰.

Summing up the evidence, small *alabastra* of ovoid shape with plain flaring neck or with ribbed rim (which is more characteristic under the chronological profile) spread in Syria-Palestine at the beginning of Middle Bronze II (Albright's Middle Bronze IIB). The prototypes might have been Egyptian, although the homogeneous chronological distribution of this class in the area points towards a local production²¹. Under the functional profile, since at Tell es-Sultan some specimens have been found in a residential context, it seems that the *alabastra* did not only have a funerary use. They were most likely used as containers of semi-liquid ointments and their function was probably similar to that of faience vessels of similar shape and scale²². The coherent pattern, that the study of this class reveals, thus stresses also in this respect the cultural unity of Syria-Palestine in the Middle Bronze Age²³.

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¹⁷ Beirut: AA.VV. 1998: 76-77 above, from a votive deposit; Byblos: Montet 1928: 196, no. 786; 1929: pl. CXVIII: 786, from Tomb III.

¹⁸ Schaeffer 1939: 62, fig. 50G, pl. XIV right, from tomb LVII (for the materials of which see *ibid.*, figs. 49-60).

¹⁹ Alalakh: Woolley 1955: 296, pls. LXXX: AT/39/244, LXXXII: 15 (plain flaring neck) from level VII palace (tomb below room 17, see *ibid.*, p. 96, fig. 36, pl. XXIIa); Ebla: see Scandone Matthiae 1988: 71 for a list of alabaster vessels from the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats and the Tomb of the Cisterns and from room L.2975 in the Western Palace (see also Scandone Matthiae 1984: 68; in press, p. 14, note 37). As far as the materials of the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats are concerned, the *alabastra* are of the type either with plain flaring neck (Scandone Matthiae 1988: pl. XIII.3 right; Matthiae et al. 1995: 501, no. 463), and with ribbed rim (Scandone Matthiae 1988: pl. XIII.2; Matthiae et al. 1995: 501, no. 464).

²⁰ Petrie 1937: 10, 22, pl. XXIX: 656-657, 660; Aston 1994: 142, shape 145. See also Bietak 1991: 43 no. 4, fig. 19: 4 from XIII Dynasty Tomb I/11-2 of Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris, stratum F.

²¹ Lilyquist 1996: 156-158 observes that in most cases it is not possible to establish if the vessels are Egyptian imports, hinting at the possibility that an opposite process might have taken place in some instances. Petrie 1931: 8 writes of the Tell el-'Ajjul alabaster vessels that "many are of Syrian work".

²² See Dajani 1962: 69-71, pl. XVI; Sagona 1980: 104-105, fig. 4 (type II: round base faience bottles). At Jericho in multiple burial tombs H11, H18, B51 and J20 both kinds of objects were associated (see Kenyon 1960: 296; 1965: 200 on the distribution of faience vessels within the tomb groups): they could have had a differentiated function or they might have belonged to different burial sets.

²³ For a comprehensive synthesis on the artistic and cultural traditions of the two areas see Matthiae 2000: 169-217, 245-267.

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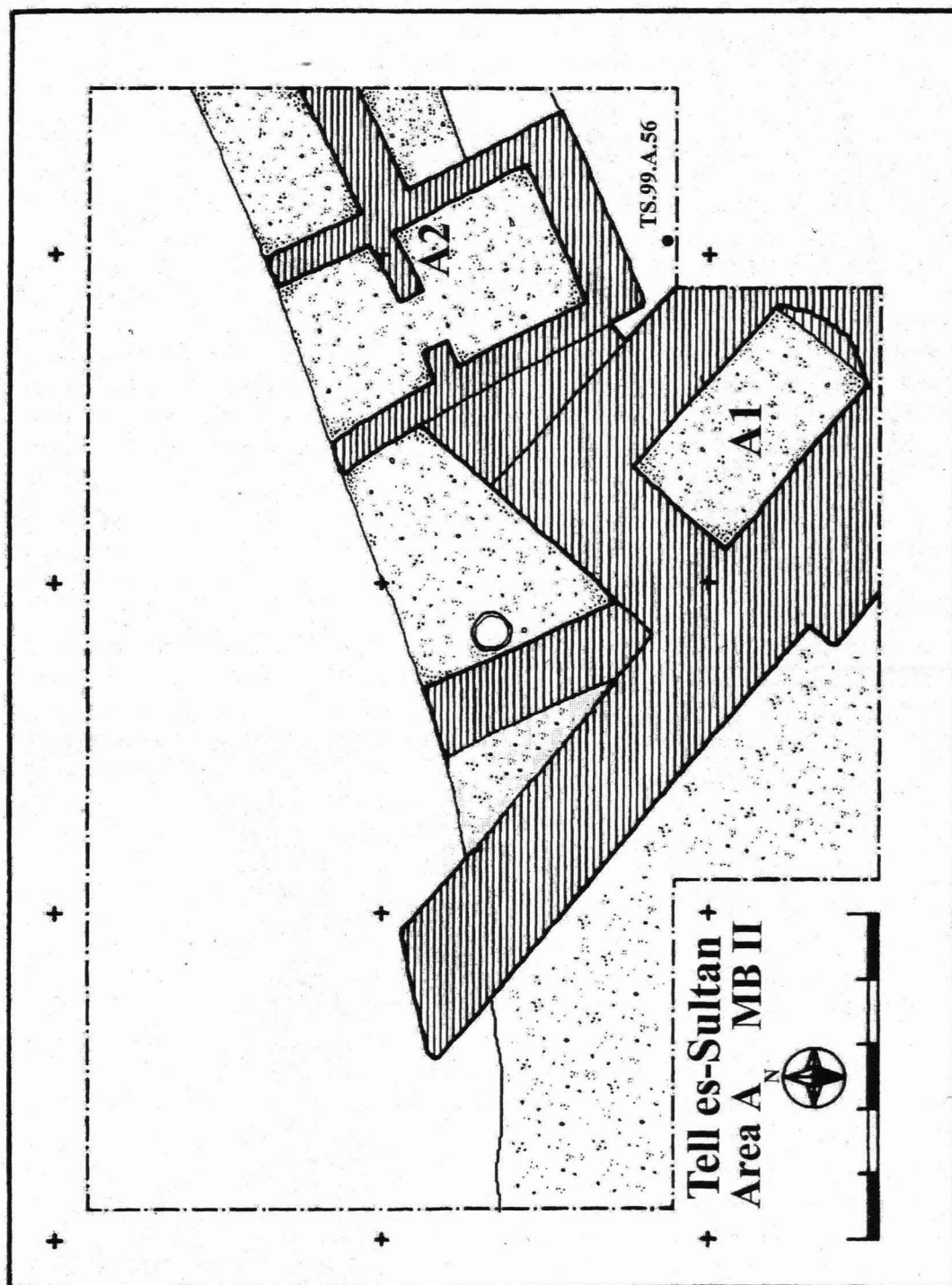


Fig. 1: Schematic plan of Area A, operation 4d, Middle Bronze II (c. 1750-1700 BC).

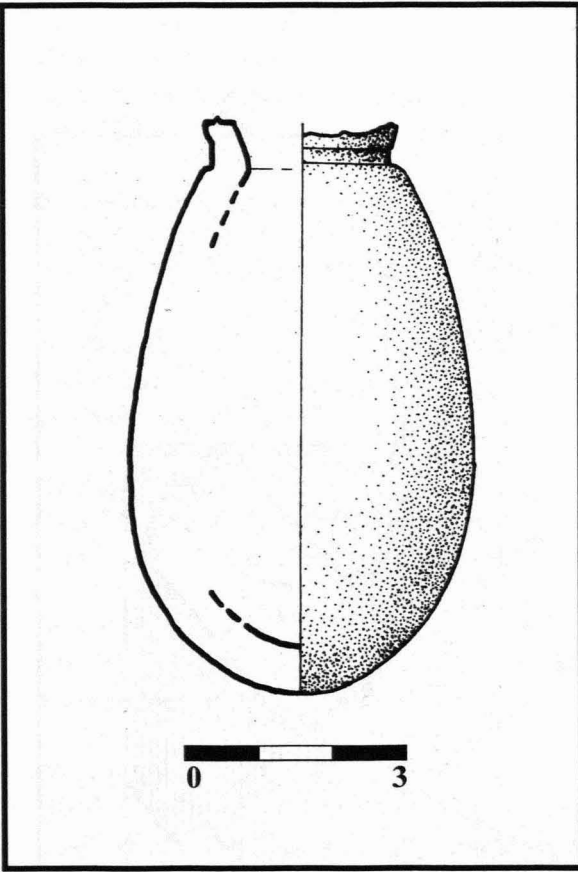


Fig. 2: MB II alabastron TS.99.A.56.

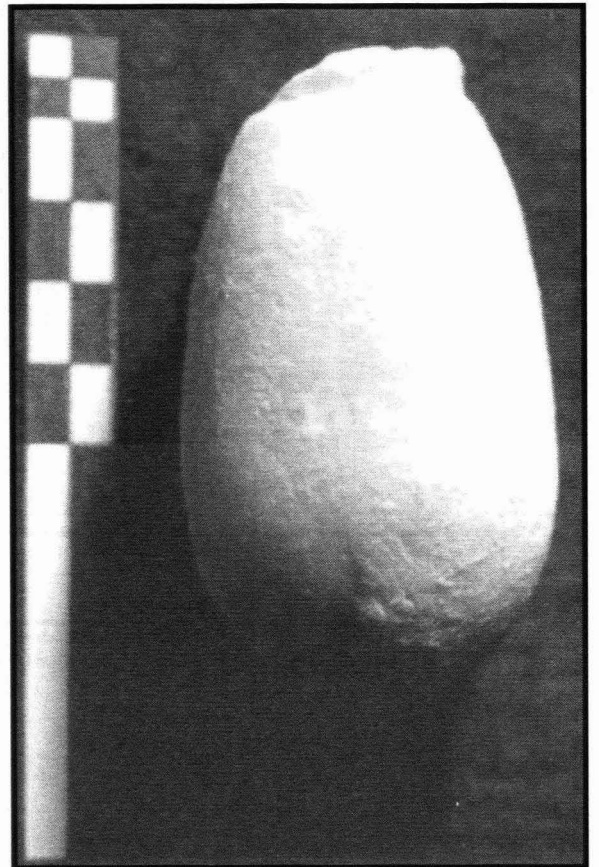


Fig. 3: MB II alabastron TS.99.A.56.