

BOOK REVIEWS

G.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*, Fribourg-Göttingen 2016 («Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis», 37), Academic Press Fribourg – Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 272 pp. + CD-ROM.

Published in 2016 in the OBO series, this volume is a revision of the Author's PhD thesis written in 2008. Therefore, the book does not include an analysis of new materials discovered after that date, given that the main aim of the study is to provide a taxonomy of motifs and designs painted on the Canaanite vessels, instead of presenting a complete corpus of available data. The classification proposed is based on the study and description of 3225 examples of painted vessels and sherds dating back to between the Late Bronze and Iron I periods, and coming from that part of the Levant defined as "Canaan", basically corresponding to the Southern Levant. The geographical area examined «extends only from the Mountains of Lebanon in the north to the Brook of Egypt in the south» (p. 212). The database is published in the included CD-ROM.

Methodologically speaking, the classification depends on identifying a "motif", defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as «an object or group of objects forming a distinct element of a design»: motifs are then distinguished into different categories (*i.e.* natural, abstract, geometric and handle decoration motifs). The taxonomy is organized adopting five main levels of analysis: Categories, Sub-categories, Classes, Types, and Sub-types, each one represented by a «classification code», consisting of the abbreviation of the key-words used for defining the motifs (p. 23). Four main categories have been identified (pp. 22-30): Category I, Natural Motif (Mn: Motif-natural); Category II, Abstract Motif (Ma: Motif-abstract); Category III, Geometric Motif (Mg: Motif-geometric); Category IV, Motifs for Handle Decoration (Mhd: Motif-handle decoration). A motif is recognized as "natural" when it is «found in the visible world», including both inanimate and animate objects and also mythical motifs with unreal features, because they are issued? (and modified) from the real world (p. 18); in this category all objects such as humans, fishes, birds and quadrupeds are obviously counted together with inanimate things. An "abstract" motif «is neither natural nor geometric» following the author's definition (p. 19); however, given that an abstract motif derives from a natural one that is unidentifiable today for us (p. 20), the distinction between these abstract objects and the schematized or "abstracted" natural ones does appear to create some epistemological difficulties. Each Category is divided into main Sub-Categories, for example, for "Natural Motifs", the A. distinguishes between "Basic" and "Composite" motifs; "Basic" motifs (Sub-Category I-1) include well-known elements such as Tree (Class 1), Flower (Class 2), Quadruped (Class 3), Bird (Class 4), but also Fish, Crab, Snake, Insect, Human, Deity (Classes 5 to 10); in the "Composite" motifs (Sub-Category I-2), the basic elements are combined together in many different ways (13 classes). Strangely enough, the second Category, "Abstract Motifs", is divided into two Sub-Categories, the real "Abstract" motifs (Sub-category II-1), such as triangles, circles, wavy lines, dots, and others, and the "Natural/Abstract Composite" motifs (Sub-category II-2). It is clearly difficult to distinguish this category of "abstract" motifs from the "Geometric" motif category, given that the elements in many cases are just the same; what is different is the interpretation of them, because «each abstract motif is regarded as an abstracted form of its original, natural object that is or was found in the visible world» (p. 109), and, on

the other hand, «geometric motifs do not bear any symbolic meaning», as basically «they are thought to be designed for the purpose of ornamentation alone» (p. 131). Anyway, the main difference between abstract and geometric motifs is that the latter always appear in patterns: thus, simple shapes, such as lines, circles, dots, squares, lozenges, are considered to be “geometric” (without any symbolic meaning, according to the A.) when they are patterned. The Geometric motifs Category (III) is divided into two Sub-categories: “Basic” (III-1) and “Composite” (III-2) geometric motifs. The “Basic” sub-category includes both the basic geometric shapes and their patterns; the use of colour in order to fill closed shapes is particularly important if one tries, for example, to discern a zigzag pattern between two parallels lines from a horizontally-running triangle (coloured) between parallels lines (see. p. 134). A Category apart (IV) includes motifs for handle decoration: these motifs are painted on the handles of vases and/or incised, and this second case does not constitute a true “decoration” (p. 153). The A. stresses that in LB-Iron I Canaanite pottery, the handles rarely bear inscriptions or incised marks, while painted single marks are quite common.

The book is organised clearly. After the principles of the typology are presented in Chapter I, all the different categories, with sub-categories, classes and types, are fully discussed and described in Chapter II (“Typology of decorative motifs”); all the figures are in the text, linked to each description of type or sub-type; the drawings derive from the already published vessels from the main Canaanite sites, such as Hazor, Beth Shean, Megiddo, Lachish, Tell Deir ‘Alla, Gezer, Ashdod, etc., but also many parallels from Northern Levant (Alalakh), Mesopotamia, Iran, or even Pakistan, are illustrated (*e.g.* Fig. II-52, p. 81, or Fig. II-54, p. 89). Chapter II constitutes the main part of the book. Chapter III (“Structures of Canaanite Pottery Paintings”) describes the “structures” or “frameworks” into which the motifs are organized; these structures are called “design” or “design structure” (p. 171), and six “designs” are recognized in the Canaanite pottery decoration (*i.e.* simple-stripe, geometric-frieze, metopic, frieze, free-style, and circle designs). Also the supposed “sources” of these designs are discussed, as they are not intended as “Canaanite inventions”: the sources are Bichrome Ware, Chocolate-on-White Ware, and the local MB II pottery (p. 195). In the case of MB II pottery tradition, the A. recalls that R. Amiran used the term “Greater Canaan” including in the idea of “Canaan” also Alalakh and Ugarit in Syria; thus, Syria-Palestine in the MB II and LB are considered a sort of “cultural block” (p. 209).

In Chapter IV (“Statistics of Occurrences and distribution Analyses”), the statistics based on the 3225 examples (from published vessels) are presented and discussed: the statistical data are summarized in the 14 Charts of occurrences and spatial distribution of different motifs and designs, and in the 20 Tables of temporal and spatial distribution. A paragraph in Chapter IV focuses on the statistical analysis of the colours used for painting. Note that a serious problem arises when analysing published materials due to some excavators having used different colour systems than the standard “Munsell Chart” for a more systematic description of colours (p. 228). Nonetheless, the analysis of colours shows that the monochrome red is a typical feature of Canaanite painted decoration; the red/black bichrome decoration is common in the LBI-IIA, but it decreases in later periods. Only a very short paragraph is dedicated to examining the archaeological contexts (IV-5. “Painted Pottery and archaeological contexts”, pp. 232-234); even if the topic is particularly difficult, because many published sherds come from unclear or undetermined contexts, an attempt to correlate the type of decoration (or the pattern) with the type of context more precisely would have been appreciated.

Chapter V (“Cultural and socio-political implications of Canaanite Pottery Paintings”) analyses the significance of the popular tree iconography, interpreted as a symbol of blessing: this tree-motif, and in particular the date-palm, is the predominant element depicted on Canaanite pottery between the LB and the Iron I periods (p. 236). The reason for this popularity, according to the A., could lie in the «belief of the inhabitants of Canaan during LB and Iron I»; in particular «the tree iconography was no doubt associated with a cult of blessing» (p. 237). In this final part of the study, readers might expect a more profound and complex approach in terms of visual analysis and interpretation of images in context. Cognitive, design,

perception factors should have been taken into account, in order to give readers a more complex explanation of the adoption and composition of certain iconographical motifs in the socio-political context examined.

In the very brief “Conclusion” (pp. 241-242), the A. recalls the purposes of the study, and the principles behind the classification system adopted. Then, the conclusions reached through the analysis are highlighted: first of all, any Egyptian influence is negligible or absent, as «Canaanite pottery painting tradition unequivocally fits into ancient Near Eastern culture»; second, the tree (interpreted as “tree of life”) is the most popular feature of Canaanite pottery paintings; third, the date-palm is the only tree species that can be safely identified; fourth, the tree iconography has a religious significance; and, fifth, this religious character of the pottery painting enables the A. to offer a socio-political interpretation, namely that the inhabitants of Southern Levant, «deprived of political power», may have «sought hope in their religion», asking for divine blessing through the images depicted on their pottery (p. 241). The volume is completed by a “Bibliography” and by an “Index of Classification Codes”; regrettably, the bibliography fails to include recent studies and field reports, given that the last publications considered date back to 2007 (as the thesis was written in 2008). This lack of a more up-to-date bibliography fatally affects the socio-political interpretation of the significance of pottery decoration in the broader context of Canaanite society in the LB-Iron I period.

In conclusion, this book certainly offers a very clear, well-organised and well-structured classification of decorative motifs and design patterns; therefore, it can help scholars to understand single decorative motifs or complex decorative structures that appear on Canaanite pottery. Moreover, it provides a considerable number of images, organised in classes and types and derived from a huge number of publications. The main limitations of the volume lie in its lack of bibliographic updates, and in the somewhat “simplistic” interpretation of the socio-political value of the preferred iconographies. Nonetheless, scholars interested in Canaanite pottery, and focusing on the LB and Iron I periods, will undoubtedly benefit from consulting this volume and using the attached database in the CD-Rom.

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A.D. NAVARRO ORTEGA, E. FERRER ALBELDA (edd.), *Trabajo Sagrado. Producción y Representación en el Mediterráneo Occidental durante el I Milenio a.C.*, Sevilla 2018 («Spal Monografías Arqueología», 25), Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 328 pp.

Published within the monograph series of the journal *Spal*, the volume *Trabajo Sagrado* is the editorial result of the eponymous conference held on 28-29 April 2015, organized by the MAS – the Archaeological Museum of Seville – in collaboration with the University of the same city. As indicated by A. Navarro in her introduction to the book, and as summarized in the title, the purpose of holding the conference was to open up a scientific debate concerning the «distintas formas de producción, procesos, espacios de trabajo y objetos que, vinculados al ámbito simbólico, formaban parte de los lugares culturales o estaban integrados en el funcionamiento de los mismos durante el I milenio a.C.» (p. 9). The work brings together eleven contributions, which, with a few exceptions (see below), pay specific attention to the archaeological contexts of south-western Spain – *i.e.* to those places described by Navarro as of «confluencia fenicio-púnica en la Tartésida» (p. 9). As we shall see, the texts seem to be organized according to criteria that, at least in some cases, may help the reader to integrate the various data collected and relate them to each other.