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New Excavation of Gath reveals Ancient Lie: The Philistines Weren't Vicious Enemy

The Philistines were wronged by history: Not barbarian or even, it seems, particularly hostile, they lived cheek by jowl with the Judahites

By Philippe Bohstrom | Mar. 29, 2016 | 8:51 PM | 1

The Philistines are much maligned as barbaric invaders of mysterious origin who didn't even have the good taste to circumcise their menfolk. Now their relations with the ancient Israelites are being recast, from bare-fanged enmity to occasionally thorny coexistence.

Excavations of the city of Gath tells a tale not of bitter enemies locked in sweaty combat, but of intimate relations.

Gath was one of the five cities in what is today Israel that had been ruled by a Philistine "axis lord": the city's ruler was allied with the Philistine lords ruling the other four cities – Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod and Ashkelon.

Situated on the fertile inland plain of Philistia, Gath figured prominently in descriptions of the Israelite-Philistine seesaw domination of the area. But how reliable are these ancient descriptions?

'Warrior giants' and Judahites

Gath and its residents, the Gittites, make several appearances in the scriptures. The best known representatives of the city are the infamous Philistine giant Goliath, whom David vanquished using only a sling, the Philistine king Achish, with whom David sheltered after fleeing from King Saul, and Obed-Edom, a Levite in whose home the Ark of the Covenant temporarily rested.

Another group of Gittites were the Rephaim, other "warrior giants", a remnant of the earlier Canaanite population, with whom the Israelites also had problems on more than one occasion. While fighting the Philistines, David and his soldiers killed four men "born to the Rephaim". Scholars have suggested that the Rephaim of Gath and Philistia may actually have been a multi-generational family of great importance that spanned both the Philistine and Judahite areas of Philistia and the Shephelah during the Iron Age. And, Gath evidently also housed Judahites, based mainly on the biblical record, though the archaeological evidence for their presence in the city is scanty.

Whoever lived in Gath, the biblical mentions of Philistines consistently dismiss them as polytheistic barbarians who superstitiously consult priests and diviners before making decisions.

In the book of Judges, the Philistines are portrayed as ruthless and weak in moral fiber: witness Delilah's use of deceitful charms to rob Samson of his power. Later they killed King Saul and his sons in battle, then viciously hung the king's headless body from the walls of Beit She'an. And to this day, the story of David's victory over the brutal giant Goliath is retold to each new generation, perpetuating the Philistines' negative image. To this very day, their bad name has survived in the disparaging term "philistine", which Oxford defines as "a person who is hostile or indifferent to culture and the arts".

But arguably, this depiction of the nasty Philistines is a misrepresentation for political purposes that go back thousands of years.

D-Day, or intimate relations

The bible depicts Judea as a small but powerful kingdom that controlled the mountains and plains, with Gath passing back and forth between Philistine to Judean control. But the archaeological evidence does not support this description. If anything, it seems that the Philistines controlled the Judean plain – and that during the Iron Age, Gath was a large, powerful metropolis on the border with Judea. The city remains feature an iron production area and massive fortifications, which are unmarked by the signs of destruction that one would expect if there was incessant warfare with Judea.

"To say that they were archenemies is a distortion," claims Gunnar Lehmann of Ben Gurion University, an expert on the pottery of the Philistines and the so-called Sea Peoples. "They may not have been the closest friends throughout history, but clear conflict is only mentioned in the time of King Saul, in the books of Samuel. As soon as you come to the narratives of King David and King Solomon, there is some sort of coexistence."

Recent excavations at Tell el-Safi, the site of the ancient city of Gath, by Prof. Aren Maeir of Bar Ilan University confirm that the Gittites - and consequently the Philistines - lived together with the local people. The seeming arch-foes described in the scriptures maintained intimate cultural ties.

"Philistine cooking vessels appear in Judah. We see Philistine words in Hebrew biblical texts and vice versa, Hebrew letters in proto-Philistine writing," Maeir told Haaretz. "We found an altar at Gath that is reminiscent of the descriptions of the Jewish altars in the scriptures, and right next to this altar, we found a jar dedicated to the Philistine temple, with a Judahite name on it."

Relations between the ancient Hebrews and the Philistines are rather like the relationship between the Israelis and Palestinians today, he suggests. They may have been enemies on the surface, but below that, "The relationship goes on many levels. We work together, we eat together, we wear the same type of clothes. It's more than just us and them."

Infiltration, not invasion

Previously, historians assumed the Philistines arrived on the Levantine coast as powerful invaders, just as the other civilizations around the region were collapsing, in about 1177 BCE.

"The image had been of a sort of D-Day invasion, where they landed on the Canaanite coast, and captured and supplanted the population," says Maeir, who has been digging at Gath for over two decades. But it seems the Philistines moved in, rather than conquered. They brought Mycenaean culture with them, but gradually became more Levantine over the years, he says.

Further supporting the theory of infiltration rather than disastrous invasion, Maeir adds: "There is almost no evidence that the Philistine culture appeared following massive destruction. Few of the Canaanite cities that existed in the southern coastal plain of Israel prior to the appearance of the Philistines show evidence of major destruction."

On the contrary, the material dating to the Iron Age in the Levant indicate a continuing cultural exchange with the Aegean. "The conception that the Sea People phenomenon was a single event in the early 13th century BCE, is wrong. I think the Sea People phenomenon was a very long process that started with various groups at the late 15th century BCE and went all the way through to the 11th century BCE," Lehmann told Haaretz.

The origin of the Philistines has been the subject of much heated debate. The Hebrew Scriptures mention "Caphtor" (Jeremiah 47:4; Am 9:7) as the Philistines' origin before their migration to Canaan. But where Caphtor might be is anybody's guess. Suggestions include Egypt itself, the southeastern coast of Cilicia, Turkey and Crete. Wherever they were from, evidently the Philistines had their issues with the Egyptians as well: Some of the earliest references to Philistines can be traced back to Egyptian records from the late 13th and early 12th century BCE, mentioning a confederation of Sea Peoples that fought against Egypt. Among these peoples were the "Peleset" (whom Ramesses III reportedly defeated at the Battle of the Delta).

Another Egyptian inscription calls the Philistines "*thr* warriors" - which is the term the Egyptians used for all kinds of troops fighting on the Hittite side in the great charioteer battle of Kadesh. Egyptologist Shirly Ben Dor Evian from Tel Aviv University sees that as attesting to the origin of the Philistines: "As far as the Egyptians was concerned they were *thr* warriors and that would place them in Anatolia, Cilicia even Syria," she explains to Haaretz.

Ultimately, it seems the Philistines, as a definable ethnic and cultural entity, emerged from a variety of western peoples that wound up settling in Canaan, and lived peacefully side-by-side with each other and with the locals. "I think there was an immigration of a variety of groups: pirates, mercenaries, and merchants," Lehmann says - qualifying that all is highly speculative.

Pirates of the Mediterranean?

Maier too thinks at least some of the Philistines may have originated as pirate groups around 1177 BCE.

"The 13th century BCE is a period of collapse. The Hittite kingdom collapsed, the Egyptian kingdom gets weaker and the Mycenaean Palatial kingdoms fell apart. Historically, we know that pirate groups flourish in a period when there is less centralized government. Also, pirate groups are often multi-ethnic cultural groups led by a charismatic leader," Maier says.

"I don't believe they had eye patches or wooden legs but I think that might help us explain how they became what we know as the Philistine culture," he elaborates. "Once they settled down, they created the identity we know as Philistines, which in the beginning had many of these western attributes. But with time, the Philistines become more Levantine in culture."

The many cultural similarities between the two peoples might explain why it was so important for both the Philistines and Israelites to differentiate themselves from each other, a tradition that was transferred into the biblical record, Maier believes.

And thus the Bible is full of anecdotes about the Gittites and Philistines, and even if they aren't necessarily true, they have proven to be more long-lived than the historical truths of science. For now the origin of the Philistines continues to be part of selective historiography and political mythology - the people whose very name has survived in the disparaging term "philistine". But, as the late Prof. Trude Dothan once asked, "Is this image deserved?" It may well not be.