The Bible mentions Gath more than 20 times, anchoring it in historical memory as a major city. The first reference to this Philistine city appears in the Book of Joshua (13: 3), when God outlines the boundaries of the promised land to the elderly Joshua, listing the parts that have yet to be conquered: “From the Shihor, which is close to Egypt, to the territory of Ekron on the north, are accounted Canaanite, namely, those of the five lords of the Philistines – the Gazites, the Ashdodites, the Ashkelonites, the Gittites, and the Ekronites – and those of the Avim.” This was the eastern border of the land of the Philistines, where it bordered the kingdom of Judah.

The love-hate relations between the Jews and the Philistines are expressed in the Bible stories about Samson. He is the twelfth judge in the biblical narratives. His father Manoah was from Zorah, in the territory of the Tribe of Dan. Zorah was on the Philistine border, on the southern coastal plain and the approach to the Judean Lowlands. This is where the “spirit of the Lord first moved [Samson] in the encampment of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol” (Judges 13:25), while he was being raised as a Nazirite, honoring the prohibitions against cutting his hair or drinking wine.

Samson’s first actions reveal the complex relations between the Israelites and the Philistines: “Once Samson went down to Timnath; and while in Timnath, he noticed a girl among the Philistine women. On his return, he told his father and mother, ‘I noticed one of the Philistine women in Timnath; please get her for me as a wife.’ His father and mother said to him, ‘Is there no one among the daughters of your own kinsmen and among all our people, that you must go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?’ But Samson answered his father, ‘Get me that one, for she is the one that pleases me.’ His father and mother did not realize that this was the Lord’s doing: He was seeking a pretext against the Philistines, for the Philistines were ruling over Israel at that time” (Judges 14:1-4).

Samson loved Philistine women. The woman from Timnath was the first of Samson’s three Philistine women. On his way to visit her, he killed a lion, in whose carcass he would later discover a beehive that inspired his famous riddle, “Out of the eater came something to eat, Out of the strong came something sweet” (Judges 14:14). During the wedding festivities, his bride betrayed his confidence and revealed the answer to the riddle to her family, obligating him to provide them with “thirty linen tunics and thirty sets of clothing” (Judges 14:12). Samson angri-

“Tell it not in Gath”

Today there is widespread consensus in academic circles that Tel es-Safi is the site of the Philistine city of Gath, which gained fame as the home of David’s foe Goliath. The excavations that Prof. Aren Maeir has been conducting at Tel es-Safi for two decades have completely changed the thinking on the Philistines and their relations with the Israelite tribes. > by ERETZ Staff

Photo: Samson at the Dagon Temple, Judges 16:30 (Gustave Dore)
The Samson cycle in the book of Judges concludes at a Thus succeeded to capture Samson and gouge out his eyes. On his brawny shoulders to a hilltop near Hebron. She too was a Philistine – a prostitute from Gaza. When the Philistines tried to capture him, he stole out of his father had married her off to someone else. Samson's temper flared again; he caught 300 foxes, tied torches to their tails, and set them loose on the Philistines' fields of grain, vineyards, and olive orchards, which quickly burned to the ground. The Israelites agreed to hand Samson over to the furious Philistines, but which quickly burned to the ground. The Israelites agreed to hand Samson over to the furious Philistines, but Samson, armed only with the jawbone of an ass, succeed to capture Goliath and Achish. David quickly realized the risks inherent in that and fell him with a slingshot. The same youth later fled the man is raving; why bring him to me? Do I lack mad. He pretended to be crazy with fear. When his attendants told him of David's craze, Achish famously replied, "You see the man is raving; why bring him to me? Do I lack madmen?" (Samuel 1:22-15:16). The narrative about David and his rise to become the king of Israel is dotted with battles between the Philistines and Israelites, such as the battle in which Saul and his sons died on Mount Gilboa fighting the Philistines.

All of these events were recorded long after the Philistines had disappeared from the world and their cities had been destroyed. The biblical narratives preserve the cloudy memories of the love-hate relations between the Israelites and the Philistines. Some of the details contain faint echoes of actual historic facts; Achish, for example, was the name of a Philistine dynasty and Gath, as a Philistine city, did have enormous gates. It is not clear how or if Samson managed to carry gates like these to the outskirts of Hebron, but their size connects the archaeological finds to the biblical narrative to some degree.

Since the beginning of biblical archaeological research of the holy land began, in the nineteenth century, searching for traces of the Philistines has been a central part of attempts to identify where the events of the Bible occurred. Edward Robinson, considered the father of biblical archaeology, set out in 1838 on an extensive trip to explore the holy land. On March 8, he visited Kafir Akir, identifying it as the Philistine city of Ekron, which the Bible describes as the northernmost of the five Philistine cities. He also concluded that the battle between David and Goliath occurred in what is today known as the Valley of Ela. Arsd he identified as the Philistine city of Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza were known, and as for biblical Gath, the last of the five cities, he concluded that to the best of his knowledge, no sign of it remained.

George Adam Smith, the Scottish theologian who was the first to coin the term historical geography, also set out to search for the Philistines, a quest he described in his 1894 book, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*. In the book he dedicated an entire chapter to "The Philistines and Their Cities." The Philistines reached the holy land via Egypt, but originally came from Crete, identifying it as the Philistine city of Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza were known, and as for biblical Gath, the last of the five cities, he concluded that to the best of his knowledge, no sign of it remained. George Adam Smith, the Scottish theologian who was the first to coin the term historical geography, also set out to search for the Philistines, a quest he described in his 1894 book, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*. In the book he dedicated an entire chapter to "The Philistines and Their Cities." The Philistines reached the holy land via Egypt, but originally came from Crete, identifying it as the Philistine city of Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza were known, and as for biblical Gath, the last of the five cities, he concluded that to the best of his knowledge, no sign of it remained.

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In 1898, the British Palestine Exploration Fund sent Frederick J. Bliss and Robert A. S. Macalister to search for Gath, the missing Philistine city. They excavated Maresheh, Tel Jazeleh, and Tel Azrekab, but did not find evidence of settlements there during the Iron Age. They finally arrived at Tel es-Safi, located in the village of a-Safi. The village houses had been built on the ruins of the large Crusader fortress that had been built on a prominent hilltop facing the Moslem city of Ashkelon. After conducting a basic survey they decided that Tel es-Safi’s location, ancient remains, and the large area it encompassed all indicate that it was the site of the city of Achish, Gath.

The ancient international highway connecting Egypt with Mesopotamia runs at the foot of the tell, and it is only a short journey from there to the Ela Valley that provides easy access to the mountain backbone and the route along the mountain connecting Hebron, Jerusalem and Shechem. The tell’s name “the shiny place,” is a reference to the shiny, white bedrock that is exposed on its western side.

For 20 years, Tel es-Safi was crowned as the city of Goliath and Achish. Then, in the 1920s, William Foxwell Albright, director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and one of the senior biblical researchers of the day, identified Tell ‘Erni as Gath, and thus remained for many decades. As a result of this identification Kibbutz Gath was established near the tell in 1942, and in 1954, a transit camp for new immigrants was established at the foot of the tell, that would eventually become the town of Kiryat Gath.

Excavations commenced at Tel ‘Erni in 1956. Remains from the Early Bronze Age and the time of the Israelites were discovered, but they all had little if any connection to Philistine culture. It became clear that Tel ‘Erni had never

Above: Sign at the entrance to the Tel Gath (Zafit) National Park (Avishai Tiecher).
been a major Philistine city, and definitely could not have been the city of Gath.

The spotlight returned to Tel es-Safi, evoking in the 1960s a heated scholarly debate as to whether it is Gath. However, it took 30 years for someone to take on the task of conducting a scientific investigation of the tell instead of continuing to rely on assumptions. In 1996, Prof. Aren Maeir, of the Martin (Sranz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University, began excavating Tel es-Safi. He found remains from the time of the Philistines from the start. It finally became clear that this large tell, that extends over some 1.25 acres, is without a doubt the city that appears at the start of David’s lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan: “Tell it not in Gath, Do not proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon, Lest the daughters of the Philistine rejoice, Lest the daughters of Ashdod rejoice at the death of Saul and Jonathan: “Tell it not in Gath, Do not proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon, Lest the daughters of the Philistine rejoice, Lest the daughters of Ashdod rejoice at the death of Saul and Jonathan” (Samuel II 1:20).

Visit to the Lab

By coincidence, the day before I met Maeir at Bar Ilan to discuss Gath and the Philistines, Professor Trude Dothan passed away. Dothan was a member of the first generation of Israeli archaeologists, and the most respected authority on the Philistines that star in the biblical narrative. Dothan first encountered the Philistines while working at the excavations at Tel Qasile. She went on to research the Early Bronze Age in more depth, focusing on Philistine culture. Her main excavation was at Tel Maqne, which turned out to be the Philistine city of Ekron. This was a surprise since it had been assumed to be at the Arab village of Akar, which turned out to have a similar name but no more. The excavation of Tel Maqne lasted for 16 seasons. In 1998, Dothan was awarded the Israeli Prize for archaeology.

The archaeologists of Dothan’s generation saw the Philistines’ arrival in the Land of Israel as a massive invasion, part of the extensive wave of migrations that occurred in the thirteenth century BCE. After clashing with the Egyptians, the Philistines were believed to have settled on the southern coastal plain around the same time that the Israelites were coalescing as a people on the mountains in the center of the Land of Israel. According to the biblical description, the Philistines and the Israelites were engaged in a continual struggle. The Philistines’ power peaked during the reign of King Saul, who died along with his sons in battle with them on Mount Gilboa. The one who finally defeated the Philistines was David, who first encountered them in the Valley of Elah. When he rose to power, he waged war on their cities, cracking the unity of the five Philistine cities into five small local entities.

While this version meshes well with the biblical references to the Philistines and their cities, the archaeological research conducted over the past three decades, including that of Meir at Tel es-Safi, paints a different picture of the Philistines and the process of their integration into the area. Tel es-Safi was the site of a large, fortified city in the second half of the fourth millennium BCE. This makes sense since the Early Bronze Age was characterized by huge tells. During the Intermediate Bronze Age, it became a small city without a wall or fortifications; archaeologists have uncovered little evidence from this period. In the Late Bronze Age, as Egyptian influence diminished in the Land of Israel, it again expanded, becoming one of the main cities in Canaan. This city is mentioned in the el-Amarna letters, the royal Egyptian archive from the time of Akhenaton, who relocated the Egyptian capital to Tel el-Amarna. The finds from the archive include 11 letters that had been sent from Gath. They were written by two different kings, Suwardata and Abdi-Aštarti. Gath apparently was one of the most important cities in the Judean Lowlands during that period, along with Gezer and Lachish. It seems to have been a difficult time for the cities in Canaan. The powers in Egypt were busy with the religious revolt that Akhenaton was leading that involved the switch to worshiping only the sun god Aton, from the prevalent belief in a ruling god supported by an entire pantheon of gods. Akhenaton’s revolt was short lived, but throughout it, Egypt was so embroiled with its internal affairs while Canaan and its eastern empire were subject to great pressures due to revolts and raids of wild tribes of outlaws known as the Habiru. One such group gained control of the city of Kešlah, located near Gath and under Suwardata’s authority. He reported on this to the Egyptians, writing, “should I go to war on them and expel them from your domain.” In the end, Suwardata subdued the rebels and regained control. However, the letters reveal that the end of the Bronze Age in Canaan was a time of unrest, with raids and campaigns constantly disturbing the security situation.

Suwardata’s final letters relate that rebellions broke out throughout his fiefdom. He begs the pharaoh for military assistance in one letter, writing about, “Cities hostile to me.” In another letter, he laments that: “I am alone. Thirty cities revolted against me and the war against me is very
Serious.’ Egypt would emerge from this period during the rule of the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties and reconquer Canaan and its cities. However, its influence in the area would weaken again at the start of the Bronze Age, when the Philistines and Israelites arrived in the Land of Israel.

Today it is believed that the Philistines and the Israelites did not arrive in a well-orchestrated wave that conquered, destroyed, and resettled the area. Almost every site where signs of Philistine settlement have been found bears no signs of destruction. On the other hand, there is evidence of the establishment of a new area for the new elites. The Philistines arrived in waves of settlers, small groups, some arriving by sea and others by land from the north. The new settlers, the Sea Peoples, came from Cyprus, Greece, Crete, and Anatolia. They arrived due to the breakdown of the existing world order, the fall of empires, worldwide economic depression, and events such as droughts, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes that wrought havoc in the Greece coastal cities. The combination of these events led to a massive wave of migration. Some people set out to seek their fortune in a new, different place, while others were forced to move by stronger, better organized groups.

The Philistines, like the Habiru and the Israelites, were groups of outsiders who rebelled against the existing order. Today it is known that the Sea Peoples were a very diverse group of peoples who had been expelled from their homes and lived on piracy in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean. Some of them became mercenaries, mainly serving the Egyptian armies. In some of the places they attacked, they ultimately settled, mixed with the local population, and created a new culture.

The Philistines were one of these groups of pirates. Their arrival marks the end of the Bronze Age in the Land of Israel and the start of the Iron Age. Reports from the days of the Egyptian rulers Ramses II, Ramses III, and Merneptah shed some light on their patterns of activity. Their leaders and wars with them also are shown in the reliefs on the burial temple of Ramses III in Medinet Habu.

The Philistines can be seen as the outcome of a vacuum in power, leading families to join together into multicultural groups that set out to seek new sources of income, raid coastal cities, and settle along the coast in hidden bays that offer a lookout point on the trade ships passing by in the sea. The pirate societies are more egalitarian, giving everyone a share of the spoils. The groups of pirates also gradually adopt shared symbols that characterize them and turn them into a coherent society. Initially the pirate raids pushed the residents of the coast inland, but ultimately the newcomers settled among the residents of the area.

Today it is clear that the Philistines possessed many of these characteristics. Their ships, at least judging by the pictures at the temple of Ramses III, were light and narrow, making them suitable for chasing trading ships. They had distinctive identifying signs, such as helmets crowned with feathers, or an image of a long beaked bird that turns up repeatedly in excavations. The Bible uses the word _sreem_ to describe the Philistine leaders. It is similar to the word _trum_ , which means tyrant, that appears in the titles of Greek rulers. Tiran however comes from the Anatolian word _troyans_ , which is the source of the word _sreem_ and means a military leader or the commander of a group of warriors.

Since they originally came from a wide mix of cultures, it is hard to identify a distinctive Philistine material culture. The groups of Philistines arrived with an eclectic selection of aspects of western cultures. They also brought over animals on their ships, mainly pigs. When these European pigs escaped to the wild they proliferated in the Land of Israel, mixed with local boars, and in doing so changed the boar DNA. As a result, the boars in the Land of Israel are different today from wild boars in other parts of the Middle East – they have European genes. The Philistines apparently also brought with them new types of crops to plant and new agricultural techniques, along with the custom of feasting and drinking beer, which is another identifying characteristic of pirates. (It was not for nothing that the Philistine’s bitter foe, Samson, abstained from drinking alcohol.)

This eclectic culture that was created in the southern coastal plain was a new, distinctive culture in which the foreign elements gradually diminished over the years. It called itself Philistine and had different characteristics than the mountain people. For example, the Philistines ate pigs and dogs, something that was not done in the mountains of Judah. The original reason for this may have been the difficulties involved in raising pigs on a mountain because they need large quantities of water and mud. In any case, it became a characteristic that was used to differentiate between the two peoples and eventually became a cultic tradition.

On the other hand, there were ties between the Philistines and the Israelites. They lived side by side, married one another, and clashed with one another, as the Samson narratives demonstrate.

The Philistines also brought new building practices, with the most notable difference being the fireplace. Two types of fireplaces have been found at Philistine sites: round ones lined with pebbles and those made of dried mud decorated with broken ceramics. These, like the Philistine heating and cooking utensils, are similar to those found in the Aegean and Anatolia.

The Bible also mentions that the Philistines iron plows. The excavations of Gath reveal that the Philistines did indeed introduce new methods of metallurgy to the land along with other technologies such as hydraulic plaster, which hardens without being exposed to the air and has been also found in excavations of Minoan and Mycenaean cities.

_**Rethinking the Philistines**_

“When I began excavating Tel es-Safi in 1996, I figured I would dig for 10 years and move on,” Maier says. “I was young – only 38. Now I’m closing in on 20 years of dig- ging there. I am slowly beginning to understand the histo- ry of this place and the region, however, it is a one step forward two steps back kind of process.”

There still are many unanswered questions and large gaps in understanding the development of the site and of Philistine culture, he emphasizes.

The great advantage discovered at the beginning of the excavations at Tel es-Safi began was that it was possible to...
easily expose the Philistine layer of the tell. There was no need to dig through many layers from later periods. The ancient tell had been completely covered by the Arab village that had existed at the site and the Philistine layer was directly below it. Gath also turned out to be much bigger and more significant than it was originally thought to be.

"Today we have a much broader understanding of the initial stage of Philistine culture, the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE," Maeir says. "We also understand the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, the end of Philistine settlement. However there are still large gaps in understanding the period in between, the ninth and tenth centuries, which were very significant in the development of the city.

From the wealth of finds the history of the habitation of Tel es-Safi can be put together. The first settlement at the site was established by the Canaanites some 3,500 years ago. During the last season, the excavation uncovered large fortifications that surrounded this early city. Maeir finds this significant since most of the cities in the Land of Israel were not fortified during that period. The Philistine city was established in the twelfth century BCE and flourished for more than 300 years. Contrary to the accepted thinking, the excavation has revealed that Philistine Gath had a mixed culture with Israelite, Canaanite, and Aegean facets. It also is important to note that no evidence has been found of Gath being conquered by the kingdom of Israel (David and Solomon) in the relevant period as described in the Bible.

"It is impossible to say that around the tenth century there was a hostile takeover by a force from the east," he emphasizes.

The most dramatic event in the history of Gath was its destruction in 830 BCE by the Aramaean king Hazael. "King Hazael of Aram came up and attacked Gath and captured it; and Hazael proceeded to march on Jerusalem," reports the Bible chronicle. The destruction of Gath by Hazael brought about significant change in the region, including the rise of the kingdom of Judah. During the last season, the excavation uncovered remains of the Aramaean siege fortifications. In 1191, Saladin conquered this fortress. During the Moslem period, the Philistine city became a Palestinian village named Tel es-Safi, which was abandoned in 1948.

During most periods, only the upper part of the tell was inhabited. In the twelfth century BCE, there also was a lower city that turned Gath into the largest city in the land at that time. The Judean lowlands and the southern coastal plain were important areas in the Land of Israel during the Bronze and Iron ages, as discovered through the many excavations conducted in this area in the past two decades. Excavations conducted at Tel Gezer, Beth Shemesh, Azekah, Tel Bornah, Tel Iton, Lachish, Hurvat Qeiyafa, Tel Zayit constitute a large, serious quantity of excavations of ancient sites scattered in this region and position it as an area of historic importance.

As the Iron Age progressed, Philistine culture became both increasingly Levantine and increasingly different in each city. The Philistines were no longer Philistines but Ashkelonites, Ekronites, Gazites, or Ashdodites. When the four remaining Philistine cities rebelled against king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia at the end of the seventh century BCE, the Babylonians completely destroyed them. The survivors were exiled. Unlike the Assyrian method, which only replaced the elite in the case of rebellion in order to enable the local leadership to continue to survive and pay tribute, the Babylonians did not believe in giving Crusader fortress. A ring trail with green trail markings leads up to and then around the tell. Yet it is there on top of the tell that the land of the Philistines can be seen, from Gaza to the approaches to Tel Aviv. If you are lucky, and everything is quiet, you might even catch a glimpse in between the shrubbery of the beautiful indigenous Mediterranean woods, of a wild boar resting under an ancient tree. He carries within him the heritage of his fathers, the ancient boars that arrived here on the Philistines’ pirate ships.

About one century after Hazael’s attack, another blow struck Gath: an earthquake. The Bible hints at this in the Book of Amos, “who prophesied concerning Israel in the reigns of kings Uziah of Judah and Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake” (Amos 1:1). With the assistance of experts in seismology the archaeologists identified the angle of the collapsed walls and thus can hypothesize that the collapse was indeed the result of an earthquake.

In the eighth century BCE, Judah ruled the city for a short time, but afterwards the city shrank and was finally abandoned. It would not rise again until some 2,000 years later when the king of England, Richard the Lionheart, arrived with the Third Crusader to establish a fortress on the hill overlooking the southern coastal plain. The remains of the fortress were uncovered during the excavations. In 1191, Saladin conquered this fortress. During the Moslem period, the Philistine city became a Palestinian village named Tel es-Safi, which was abandoned in 1948.

Facing page: Tel es-Safi, which was abandoned in 1948.

Below: Sheikh’s tomb on Tel Gath (Uri).

Facing page: Find from the Tel Gath excavations (Courtesy of the Tel Gath Excavations Expedition).