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in Honor of
Israel Finkelstein*

edited by

ODED LIPSCHITS, YUVAL GADOT, and MATTHEW J. ADAMS

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Rethinking the Philistines: A 2017 Perspective

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The Sea Peoples in general and the Philistines in particular have been the focus of much research, just about from the very beginning of modern archaeological exploration in the southern Levant (e.g., Welch 1900; Macalister 1914). Over time, the accepted paradigms, based on the constantly expanding archaeological evidence, have substantially changed. In fact, to a large extent, the picture that up-to-date research on the Philistines (as of 2017) can now draw is quite different from that of only a few decades ago (e.g., Dothan 1982; Sandars 1985; Gitin et al. 1998; Oren 2000). These changes are due in part to the large amount of new finds relating to the Philistines from the southern Levant and to the 12th century BCE in Greece and in Cyprus, which have been unearthed in the last 2 or 3 decades, as well as to new interpretive frameworks, perspectives, and collaborations that have been applied to the relevant evidence. These new directions indicate the vibrant and lively state of Philistine studies in recent years and the infusion of innovative and at times revolutionary ideas into current research. Moreover, while the Philistines and related issues have been studied for more than a century, it appears that there is yet much to be accomplished in this field.

In this paper, we wish to present several salient points relating to these new perspectives on the Philistines, based, to a large extent, on our own research at Tell es-Şafi/Gath over the last two decades or so, as well as in relation to other recent finds and interpretations. It is with much pleasure that we dedicate this paper to Prof. Israel Finkelstein—to honor his contribution to the archaeology of the southern Levant and ancient Israel in general, to his continuous effort to not let us, his colleagues, rest on our laurels and always be there to challenge accepted opinions, for his important contributions to the field of Philistine studies themselves (e.g., Finkelstein 1995, 1996b, 2000, 2002, 2007; Finkelstein and Piasezky 2007; Eliyahu-Behar et al. 2012; Meiri et al. 2013), and last, but not least, as an appreciation of his friendship!

The Date of First Appearance of the Philistine Culture

For quite a few years, the accepted dating of the first appearance of the Philistine culture was placed somewhere in the early decades of the first half of the 12th century BCE, ca. 1185–1178 BCE (e.g., Dothan 1982; Stager 1995; Mazar 1985a). On the other hand, a later date for this, sometime in the mid-to-late 12th century BCE has been suggested by various scholars (e.g., Ussishkin 1985) as well as the honoree (Finkelstein 1996b). Recent evidence seems to indicate that the very first

appearance of the Sea Peoples/Philistine cultural phenomenon may date to even earlier, during the late 13th or very early 12th century BCE. Radiometric dating from Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath (Toffolo et al. 2012; Asscher et al. 2015) and Tell Tweini in Syria (Kaniewski et al. 2011, 2013) seem to support this. Similarly, Yasur-Landau has suggested, based on a chrono-stylistic analysis, that LH IIIc pottery, seen as typical of the Sea Peoples/Philistine phenomenon, appeared already during the late 13th century BCE, during the reign of Rameses II (Yasur-Landau 2003, 2010).

Israel himself (Finkelstein 2016) has recently raised objections to this suggestion, arguing that the early 14C datings from Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath (Toffolo et al. 2012; Asscher et al. 2015a) and Qubur el-Walaydah (Asscher et al. 2015b) are methodologically insufficiently robust to warrant accepting an earlier date for the appearance of the Philistine culture. A detailed response to his objections will be published in the future with collaborators in these studies. We contend that the main point to be noted is we believe that these earlier dates should be seen as evidence strengthening the argument for long and gradual processes in the appearance of the Philistine culture. Moreover, we do not suggest that the full-blown appearance of the cultural package of the early Philistine culture appeared already in the late 13th century BCE. Rather, as already argued by Yasur-Landau (2003, 2010), we believe that the emergence of the Philistine culture was a complex and drawn-out process of interactions, most likely occurring over several decades (if not more), with varying vectors, multiple origins, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of the various peoples who eventually coalesced into the Philistine culture. As discussed below, one should not look for a single immigration event, a single origin, and a single simple and easily traceable trajectory but rather a much more complex set of processes. As Yasur-Landau (e.g., 2010; also Voskos and Knapp 2008) has stressed, it is very common in migration events that, before the arrival of large numbers of foreign immigrants to a new area, previous connections and earlier arrivals can be seen over a lengthy period. Thus, we believe that it is very likely that prior to the seemingly sudden appearance of the Philistine culture, with its diverse foreign origins (as noted below), the first exploratory “swallows” of the connections to, for example, LH IIIc and LM IIIc cultures, may have arrived in Canaan.

Origins of Philistine Culture

Going back beyond biblical times as early as the Hittite texts on Ahhiyawa and up to the present (e.g., Oren 2000; Killebrew and Lehmann 2013a), the question of the origins of the Philistines has been of major interest. While most of contemporary narratives suggests that the Philistines originated in the Aegean, some have suggested very specific origins, such as deriving them directly from Mycenaean culture (e.g., Dothan 1982, and more recently, for example, many of the papers in Killebrew and Lehmann 2013a; as well as Faust and Lev-Tov 2011, 2014; Master and Aja 2017). In fact, quite a few identifications of the *urheimat* of the Philistines have been suggested (for some recent views on their geographic origins see, e.g., Yasur-Laundau 2010: 97–121; Killebrew and Lehmann 2013b: 8–10; Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016: 28–29). However, we believe that this is an exercise in futility, because

it appears that it will never be possible to determine a specific *alt Philistia*. The reason for this is quite simple. As opposed to many of the earlier studies in which the early Philistine culture was seen as a uniform set of material correlates that could be compared to a specific culture of origin (being it Mycenaean, Minoan, Anatolian, Italic, Cypriot, etc.), recent study on the early Philistine material assemblage has repeatedly demonstrated that it is, in fact, of very diverse and entangled origins. Even if one cherry-pick a component that is similar to a specific culture in the eastern Mediterranean, one does not see a complete assemblage representing a specific culture—instead, a close investigation or reading reveals an eclectic collection of material attributes of various cultures. For example, although the similarity between the early Philistine (Philistine 1/Myc IIIC) pottery and that of LH IIIC and LM IIIC pottery in Greece, Cyprus, and other areas has been noted, one never has the complete assemblage of this pottery as seen in areas outside of Philistia. Rather, in Philistia one sees a specific repertoire (such as the deep bowl, krater, cooking jug, etc.), while missing others often found in Aegean contexts (such as the Cretan tripod, stemmed kylix, which is diminishing in occurrence, etc.). Another reason for these mistaken identifications is a superficial similarity between specific types of objects and/or installations seen in early Philistia. An example of this is the appearance of the hearth in Philistia, which time and again has been compared to the hearths in Mycenaean palaces. But, as previously shown (Maier and Hitchcock 2011), they are quite different, and it is dubious that they can be compared as well to Aegean hearths, with the single exception of a keyhole-shaped pebble hearth recently attested at Knossos (Kanta 2014).

When one closely examines the overall assemblage typical of the early (and even later) Philistine culture, the very mixed origins are apparent. A broad spectrum of cultural influences can be seen, as often noted before (see, recently, Hitchcock and Maier 2016b), including Mycenaean (some pottery forms), Minoan (architecture, cultic paraphernalia; Hitchcock et al. 2016), Cypriote (hearths, some pottery forms; Maier and Hitchcock 2011), Anatolian (language? Maier et al. 2008; Davis et al. 2015; Maier et al. 2016), and even southwest European (bimetallic knives—Sheratt 1998) aspects can be found. Similarly, not only are foreign features seen in the early Philistine culture, but local Canaanite features (such as cooking pots, ivory objects, chalices, benches [Maier et al. 2015]) can also be found. To this we can add that faunal and botanical evidence indicate the appearance of species of multiple origins during the early Iron Age (e.g., Meiri et al. 2013; Frumin et al. 2015). Thus, as we have repeatedly argued in the past (Hitchcock 2011; Hitchcock and Maier 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, in press; Hitchcock et al. 2015; Maier et al. 2015; Maier and Hitchcock 2016, 2017), it appears that the Philistine culture should be seen as an “entangled” culture—one comprised of many elements of various origins, which jointly coalesced into what became the Philistine culture. While there is no doubt that there are many foreign elements in this culture, and perhaps even the elites were of foreign origin, one cannot define the early Philistine culture as deriving from a specific non-Levantine locale, relocated through a simple process of migration to the region of Philistia during the early Iron Age.

On a related issue, the original paradigm—that the Philistines arrived in a monolithic migration event, forcibly taking over Philistia and destroying the existing Canaanite cities—cannot be accepted either. Not only does the early Philistine material culture hint at a diverse origin of the Philistines (as noted above), there is very little evidence of destruction layers in the Canaanite cities in Philistia prior to the appearance of the Philistine culture. Save for limited evidence of destruction in portions of some of the site (e.g., Ashdod, Ekron, and Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath), it appears that, by and large, there was continuity in settlement at the Philistine sites in the transition between the Late Bronze and early Iron Age levels (when the Philistine material attributes first appear and evidence of destruction is absent). Moreover, in the early Philistine levels, various Canaanite-like cultural attributes can be seen side-by-side with non-local facets, hinting at the coexistence of local and non-local elements during this phase. In other words, as noted above, the entangled character of early Philistine culture involved various foreign and local elements.

The Sea Peoples and the Philistines as Pirates?

The existence of piracy in the ancient world is hardly a new topic. In fact, various scholars (e.g., Jung 2009; Gilan 2013) have suggested that pirate groups played a significant role in the transition between the Late Bronze and early Iron Age, due, among other reasons, to the weakening of many of the major polities in the eastern Mediterranean at the time. In fact, some have gone on to claim that some of the Sea Peoples may have been pirate-like. In a series of articles, we have argued in recent years (Hitchcock and Maeir 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, in press) that a fresh, detailed look at the early Philistine culture supports the interpretation that the various tribes collectively known today as the “Sea Peoples” had a significant component that took the form of culturally mixed tribes of pirates and military entrepreneurs (such as mercenaries, bandits, and warriors) whose identity coalesced around particular Aegean and Italic symbols. The “entanglement” that we suggest for the Philistine culture, and most likely other “Sea Peoples” as well, may reflect a situation that is known from historical examples of piracy, involving multiethnic groups, led by charismatic leaders, who are particularly active during times of social, economic, and political acceleration, breakdown, and disarray. This said, we do not deny the possibility that other components and underlying mechanisms are connected to the early Philistine and “Sea Peoples” groups but that piratical activities, pirate groups, and other types of military entrepreneurs may have played a significant role.

Language and Writing among the Philistines

Much has been written on identification of the language(s) and script(s) of the early Philistines (e.g., in recent years, Machinist 2000; Cross and Stager 2006; Maeir et al. 2008, 2016; Davis et al. 2015; Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016). The most common suggestion has been that the early Philistines spoke a language related in some way to Mycenaean Greek and used a script related to Aegean scripts such as Linear B and Cypro-Minoan. Support for this has been seen in various terms and names appearing in the biblical text (most recently, see an extensive list compiled

by Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016, but see Simon's [2016] reservations) and among the very limited corpus of Philistine inscriptions (e.g., Gitin et al. 1997; Maeir et al. 2008), with connections with Mycenaean and Classical Greek and other early Indo-European languages. Likewise, hints in early Iron Age inscriptions with scripts reminiscent of Aegean scripts (e.g., Cross and Stager 2006; Singer 2009) seem to indicate that the early Philistines utilized scripts brought from the Aegean region.

Recently, we (along with Brent Davis; Davis et al. 2015; Maeir et al. 2016) have raised some doubts about these broadly accepted conclusions. To start with, the corpus of Philistine inscriptions is very small, making many of the suggested interpretations somewhat shaky at best. Second, the association between the various terms and names and other non-Semitic languages is quite complex, and even if one accepts some of them, they indicate connections with several different ancient non-Semitic languages. In addition, the few alleged inscriptions in Aegean-like scripts are quite problematic. None are deciphered, and none are identical to any of the known Aegean scripts. Finally, the reasoning behind the very use of writing in the early Aegean is not taken into account in the discussion of why the Philistines might have used such a script. From what is currently known, all writing in the Bronze Age Aegean was used in the context of palatial systems and confined to administrative record-keeping in the Mycenaean period. Once these palatial systems collapsed in the late 13th/early 12th centuries BCE, the very justification and sociopolitical context for their use ceased to exist, and the scribal schools and traditions that were sustained by these systems were severely depleted. Because, thus far, there is no indication of a continuation of an Aegean-like palatial sociopolitical structure in early Iron Age Philistia (and in fact, the absence of palatial-style hearths indicates otherwise: e.g., Hitchcock and Maeir 2017), it is hard to accept the possibility that Aegean-style writing was employed in any substantial way.

Thus, we would suggest that it very well may be that non-local and non-Semitic languages were introduced to Philistia in the early Iron Age, reflecting some of the diverse non-local and non-Semitic population of the entangled Philistine culture. On the other hand, as of now, more than a century after the commencement of modern excavations in Philistia, there is no substantial evidence of the systematic use of an Aegean-style writing system in Philistia. Memory of the non-Semitic languages in early Iron Age Philistia seems to have persisted in the Philistine culture into the later Iron Age and is reflected both in late Iron Age Philistine inscriptions (e.g., Ekron—Gitin et al. 1997; but see cautionary remarks in Press 2012a) and the very likely non-Semitic Philistine words appearing in late Iron Age biblical texts.

The Development and Transformation of Philistine Culture during the Iron Age

For many years, the developmental trajectory of the Philistine culture was seen as follows (e.g., Hitchcock and Maeir 2016b): following the arrival of Aegean migrants at the very beginning of the Iron Age in Philistia, a new Aegean-inspired culture was formed. In the first two centuries of the Iron Age, this culture, due to sophisticated technology and sociopolitical organization, dominated the region of Philistia and neighboring areas. Soon after the first stages of the Philistine culture,

in which Aegean elements were dominant, the Philistines began going through a gradual process of transformation, as more and more local Levantine elements were incorporated into Philistine culture. So much so, that with time—and particularly from the 10th century BCE onward—Philistine culture lost its uniqueness, and by the end of the Iron Age more or less assimilated into the other Levantine cultures.

As of the early 1980s, this picture has been questioned. Starting with, for example, Stone (1995), a much more complex process of cultural development was suggested (for a recent summary, see Hitchcock and Maeir 2016b). To start with, early Philistine cultural origins, sources, and processes were seen as more diverse (as discussed above). Second, the process of change and transformation of the Philistine culture from the late Iron I onward was viewed through more sophisticated lenses and more complex processes such as acculturation, creolization, hybridity, entanglement, and transculturalism. Third, it was demonstrated that although many of the foreign-inspired cultural facets seen in early Philistine culture do disappear, or appear less frequently, from the late Iron I onward, nevertheless, Philistine culture did retain a unique and easily definable character throughout the Iron Age, which did not assimilate into other Levantine cultures toward the end of the Iron Age. And to this one can add that some of the non-local cultural attributes originating in early Iron I also continue to appear in the late Iron Age (such as non-Semitic personal names, names of a goddess, and some technical terms).

Similarly, the relations between the Philistine and surrounding cultures cannot be seen as a one-way street in which other Levantine cultures had an ongoing, continuous influence on the Philistines, and as a result Philistine culture slowly took on more and more Levantine facets. Rather, as previously demonstrated (e.g., Ben-Shlomo et al. 2004, 2008; Maeir and Eshel 2014; Maeir and Shai 2015; Hitchcock and Maeir 2016b; Maeir and Hitchcock 2016), the influence between the Philistines and surrounding cultures was bi-directional. Without a doubt, the Philistines were highly influenced by these neighboring cultures, but one also can point out numerous ways in which Levantine cultures were influenced by aspects of Philistine culture.

In other words, just as the very origins of the Philistines and their culture should be viewed in the context of complex and multifaceted sets of processes, so the ongoing development and transformation of Philistine culture during later phases of the Iron Age should be examined and understood as composite trajectories of development, influence, definition, and change—not merely as a protracted vector of cultural demise.

The Philistines and Relations with the Early Monarchy in Judah and Israel

The last two decades have seen an extraordinary amount of discussion on a broad range of issues relating to the early monarchy in Israel and Judah. The honoree had a major role and broad effect on these discussions (starting, to a large extent with Finkelstein 1996a, and continuing to this day). We do not intend to delve deeply into the broad range of issues relating to the early monarchy but, instead, briefly discuss the character of the relationships between the Philistine and the Israelite

and Judahites during the early stages of Iron IIA, a time when most scholars agree that initial manifestations of both the Israelite and Judahite Kingdoms (and for some, the “United Monarchy”) existed. Here is the underlying question: What is character of the relationship between the Philistines and the Israelites/Judahites in the early Iron IIA, when the first evidence of the appearance of the highland polities appears? Can one identify evidence of the domination of Philistia by an eastern polity (whether Israel, Judah, or a “United Monarchy”)? Is there any support for the biblical narratives of a military and political domination of Philistia at this time? Can evidence of deep changes in the cultural affiliation of Philistia be identified, supposedly brought about by the strong Israelite/Judahite influence in the 10th century BCE?

Up until quite recently, a Davidic conquest of Philistia was accepted by many scholars. For example, the end of Tel Qasile Stratum X, dated to sometime in the late 11th/early 10th century BCE, was seen as the result of a Judahite military campaign (e.g., Mazar 1985b). This seemingly matched a variety of biblical evidence of a Judahite dominance of Philistia during the early Monarchy. More recently, Faust (e.g., 2013, 2015a, 2015b; 2017; Faust and Lev-Tov 2011, 2014) has repeatedly asserted that the Judahite dominance of Philistia in the 10th century BCE, aside from having a political manifestation, had a profound effect on the Philistine culture as well. According to this view, due to Judahite political and cultural domination at this time, the Philistine culture shed its supposedly Aegean-influenced elements, such as decorated pottery, hearths, and consumption of pork. In addition, Faust suggests that at this time the Philistines commenced the practice of circumcision (see additional discussion below). All of these and other facets were, in Faust’s view, key features in Philistine cultural identity and differentiation from other groups during Iron I; once Philistia was dominated by Judah, these differences were shed.

As we have argued previously, this view of the relations between Philistia (and, in particular, the Kingdom of Gath) and the early Judahite Monarchy is untenable (e.g., Maeir et al. 2013; Maeir and Hitchcock 2016; Maeir and Shai 2015). Our claim is supported by various lines of evidence.

To start with, the settlement history of Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath argues to the contrary. As has been demonstrated through more than twenty years of excavation, Gath of the Philistines was a large and prosperous city from early Iron I until its final destruction by Hazael in Iron IIA (ca. 830 BCE). And in fact, during Iron IB and IIA, until this destruction, the site was extensive, including an upper and lower city (of ca. 45–50 ha), making it one of the largest cities in the Levant at the time. In addition, no evidence of any traumatic events in the history of Philistine Gath, from the early 12th century BCE until the Hazael destruction, can be seen, nor any major changes in the material culture at the site. The finds at Gath argue quite convincingly that the site was a continuously occupied, large, prosperous site throughout Iron Age I–IIA, most likely the primary polity in the southern Levant. If one can speak of dominant kingdoms in the southern Levant during the Iron IIA, the Kingdom of Gath is a much more likely candidate than the early Judahite Kingdom. Possible corroboration of this may be seen in the remains at Khirbet Qeiyafa (Garfinkel et al. 2016). Whether one accepts the identification of the site as Judahite or

not, its proximity to Gath (ca. 11 km to the east of Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath) and the fact that the fortified site of Khirbet Qeiyafa was destroyed soon after it was built raises the possibility that it was destroyed by the Kingdom of Gath because it was seen as a threat. The large, massively fortified site of Gath, with a continuous and flourishing material culture throughout the Iron I and Iron IIA, can only be understood as the center of a large and prosperous kingdom, and there is no evidence at all that it was dominated by the Kingdom of Judah.¹

A similar picture can now be seen at the new excavations at Khirbet el Rai, 3 km to the west of Tel Lachish (Garfinkel and Ganor 2017). Stratum VII at the site, which they identify as Judahite (based, among other things, on the similarity of the finds to those from Khirbet Qeiyafa), was obliterated in a severe destruction. This destruction is dated by the excavators to the early 10th century BCE, parallel, in their opinion, to the destruction of Khirbet Qeiyafa (2017: 62–65). Based on what is published in the preliminary report (and from visual inspection of the materials themselves²), the similarity and parallel dating to Khirbet Qeiyafa seems very likely. After this destruction, the site is abandoned until the 8th century BCE. Most importantly, in their opinion, Lachish Level V was founded only after the destruction of Khirbet el Rai (2017: 64–65, Table 2).

This being the case, if one accepts the identification of these sites as Judahite, the destructions of both Khirbet Qeiyafa and Khirbet el Rai may be seen as evidence of a failed attempt by the incipient Judahite Kingdom to expand to the west (Khirbet Qeiyafa) and southwest (Khirbet el Rai). Due to the large size and prominent position of Gath at the time, the Kingdom of Gath is the most likely agent of these destructions. And if one does not accept that these sites are Judahite (whether Canaanite, Israelite, or other—but clearly not Philistine, because their material culture is quite different from contemporaneous Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath), the fact that both are destroyed at the same time most likely can be related to the geopolitical clout that Gath wielded at the time.

Similarly, the claim that from the Iron IIA onward the Philistines shed the unique aspects of their culture due to cultural domination by others is without basis. We see the continuation of Iron I Philistine culture in various ways, such as the continuation of early motifs in Iron IIA Philistine decorated pottery (Maeir and Shai

1. Most recently, Faust (2017) has reiterated this claim, in what can only be seen as a convoluted effort to explain away the unusual size and status of Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath during the 10th century BCE, insisting that it is an anomaly, surrounded by Judahite sites. An illustration of this is his belief (2017: 98) that Tel Harasim, just 4 km NNW of Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath, was a Judahite site during the 10th century BCE, supposedly demonstrating the Judahite dominance of the vicinity of Gath. This claim, however, is without basis. When one examines the published reports on the excavations of this site, it is clear that Stratum IVd, which was dated by the excavators to the early Iron IIA (10th century BCE) and seen as a Judahite site (e.g., Givon 1998; 2008), in fact should be dated to the Late Bronze Age! The material culture, and in particular the pottery, is clearly of Late Bronze Age date (e.g., Inbar 1997: figs. 10–10), save for a small number of finds that seem to date to the Iron IIB, apparently intrusive from later strata (e.g., fig. 10:1, 4, 6–7, 10–11). In fact, even the strata above Stratum IV, Strata IVb–c, contain primarily Late Bronze Age materials (e.g., Inbar 1998: figs. 10–13). Clearly, one cannot accept the excavators' claims that the site is a 10th-century BCE Judahite site—and a quick review of the published pottery demonstrates this.

2. Thanks to Yossi Garfinkel for showing A.M.M. the finds from the excavations.

2015), the continuation of pork consumption at some Philistine sites (e.g., Horwitz et al. in press), the continuation of architectural features such as hearths, bench installations, and horned altars, and non-local cultic behaviors (e.g., Hitchcock et al. 2016). While foreign influences are seen in Philistia in the Iron I and Iron II, and some of the earlier non-local cultural manifestations of the early Philistine culture disappear over a long time, one cannot speak of a sudden and complete change in Philistine culture in the 10th century BCE. In fact, although Levantine influences are seen in various aspects of daily life, Philistine influences on Judahite material culture are seen as well, such as the cooking vessels (Ben-Shlomo et al. 2008) and Philistine cultic items that appear in Judah. For example, figurines with similarities to Philistine figurines were published by Kisilevitz (2015: 166–68) from an Iron IIA temple at Moza, near Jerusalem.³ Similarly, Philistine pottery and cultic objects have been reported from the City of David (Mazar and Karlin 2015; Uziel, Szanton, and Cohen-Weinberger 2015).

Thus, in contrast to a picture of Judahite domination of Philistia during Iron IIA, a picture emerges in which the Kingdom of Gath is the dominant polity at the time, and ongoing relations between Philistia in the west and the Shephelah and the Central Hill regions in the east were bi-directional. If anything, it is safe to assume that the Kingdom of Gath radiated power from west to east, and it most probably curtailed the ability of the incipient Judahite Kingdom to expand westward at this time (see also Maeir 2017). This said, while we firmly believe that the Judahite Kingdom could not have expanded into the central Shephelah (save for its eastern periphery, such as at Beth Shemesh) prior to the destruction of Gath by Hazael in ca. 830 BCE, it may have expanded in minor ways into the southern Shephelah, skirting the region under the control of the Kingdom of Gath (but see the discussion on Khirbet Qeiyafa and Khirbet el Rai above).

On the Martial Nature of the Philistines: Biblical Image versus Archaeological Reality

The image that is often conjured in modern understanding of the Philistines is that of a strong, warlike society. This seems to be based on the martial image of the Philistines in the biblical narratives, where they are depicted as repeatedly fighting the Israelites and Judahites (at times, quite successfully), along with the well-known reliefs in the mortuary temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu, where the Philistines and other “Sea Peoples” are depicted carrying a variety of weapons as they battle the Egyptian army and navy. For those who suggest that Goliath and his impressive panoply reflect Philistine military and technological dominance during the early Iron Age (e.g., Yadin 1955; King 2007; Garsiel 2009; Millard 2009; Zorn 2010, cf. Finkelstein 2002; see further discussion below), this is an additional reflection of the martial character of Philistine culture.

This being the case, one would expect that, after more than a century of quite intensive excavations at many sites in Philistia, evidence of the weaponry related to Philistine culture would have emerged. But in fact, the situation is very much not

3. On the issue of Philistine figurines, see also Press (2012b; 2014).

so. As already noted by Koller (2012: 191–92), very few items that can be identified as weaponry have been identified from Iron I (and by and large, even Iron II) Philistia. Earlier, it was suggested that a sword supposedly from Beth Dagon, Israel, and now in the British Museum should be identified as a Philistine sword, identical to the straight swords held by the “Sea Peoples” in the Medinet Habu reliefs, but Shalev (1988) long ago demonstrated that in fact the object should be dated to the EB IV and had no connection with the Philistines. Leaving aside an occasional arrowhead found at various Philistine sites during Iron I and Iron II, it is hard to point out almost any object from this period and this area that can be identified as a weapon (this does not include bladed objects that were used for cultic functions, such as the well-known “bimetallic knives”; see Dothan 2002).⁴

Although we certainly would not suggest that the Philistines were “tree-hugging pacifists” (e.g., Hitchcock and Maeir 2016), the glaring lack of weaponry at sites associated with Philistine culture cannot be ignored. While some of this absence can be explained through post-depositional processes and the vagaries and chance of archaeological discovery, if in fact the Philistines were a martial-oriented society, with extensive military exploits (as one would believe from the biblical narratives), some reflection in the archaeological evidence would be expected, such as the materials from the warrior burials in Europe and in the Aegean during the Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age (Treherne 1995; Whitley 2002). Perhaps this indicates that the very character of Philistine culture during the early Iron Age, as a socially dominant, conquering, and militarily active society, should be reassessed. Is this supported by the archaeological evidence, rather than the biblical texts and the Egyptian reliefs? Or perhaps was the on-the-ground reality somewhat different? What exactly this evidence reflects we are not able to determine, but it does indicate that we should be wary of the previously accepted highly martial image of the Philistines.⁵

The Philistines in the Biblical Narrative: What Does This Reflect?

Much has been written on the relationship between the biblical text and the Philistines and what the text actually reflects from a historical point of view. Some scholars still adhere to a very traditional understanding of the biblical narratives relating to the Philistines before and during the early stage of the Israelite/Judahite

4. Based on what we know from the recently discovered, extensive Iron II cemetery at Ashkelon (based on personal communication with the excavators, press reports, and papers presented at the Annual Conference of the American School of Oriental Research [San Antonio, Nov. 2016]; and see now Master and Aja 2017), almost none of the burials contained weaponry, save for one male who was buried with a collection of arrowheads, perhaps representing the contents of a quiver. To the best of our knowledge, so-called “warrior burials,” with a panoply of weaponry, have not been discovered.

5. We do realize that the lack of military hardware from Iron Age Philistia might run contrary to the suggestion that some of the early Philistines had a pirate-like character. A possible explanation of this would be that the (presumed) pirate-like behavior of some early Philistines was abandoned after their arrival in Philistia in Iron I. Or, perhaps, the metal weapons were recycled into implements useful to an agrarian society. For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Maeir in press.

monarchies (most recently, Singer 2013; Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016). On the other hand, there are those who suggest that there is very little historicity and little genuine connection between the Philistines depicted in the biblical text and those that actually existed, because the relevant biblical texts, according to this view, are post-Iron Age (Davies 1992; Thompson 1999). Israel Finkelstein (2002) took a different stance, suggesting that a large part of what the biblical text describes regarding the Philistines reflects the very late Iron II and mirrors the strong Greek influence evident in the Levant during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE.

Our opinion on the matter is somewhat in the middle. We do not see substantial evidence of in-depth knowledge and detailed reflection of Iron I Philistine culture and society in the biblical text. That said, we believe that there is reflection of some of the sociopolitical realities of Iron I (at least of Iron IB) in Philistia, and its relation to Judah is evident in the biblical text. For example, the dominant position that the Philistines in general, and the Kingdom of Gath in particular, assume in the biblical narratives relating to pre- and early monarchical times seems to quite accurately reflect what we know from the archaeological evidence. In particular, the large city of Gath, from the mid-late Iron I (11th century BCE) up until the destruction of the city by Hazael, is eloquent evidence of this. As noted previously (e.g., Maeir 2012; Maeir et al. 2013; see as well Finkelstein 2013), the prominent position of Gath in the biblical text could not have been reflected in the biblical texts if these texts did not retain historical memory of this city at least during Iron IIA and perhaps even into the later years of Iron I. In addition to this, there may be some linguistic hints regarding early Philistine language, including early names and words, embedded in the biblical narratives (see the discussion of Philistine language above). For example, Finkelstein suggested (2002) that the biblical term for the leaders of the Philistines, is a reflection of the Greek term *tyranos*, dating to the late Iron Age, and in his opinion, indicative of the mainly late Iron Age reality reflected in the biblical description of the Philistines. Contrary to this view, more recent research indicates that *seren* may derive from the Luwian term *tarwanis* (“warlord,” a term appropriate in earlier times for a pirate culture), known from as early as the 10th century BCE at the site of Tell Tayinat (which some have suggested as being a site with Sea People linkages; Guisfredi 2009; Maeir et al. 2016; cf. Simon 2016; Younger 2016: 127–35). If this is the case, the retention of an early term for the Philistine leaders may be an example of the preservation of early Iron Age cultural facets in the biblical narratives regarding the Philistines. Some years ago, one of us argued that several phallic objects found at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath in the Iron IIA, 9th century BCE, destruction level might be related to the enigmatic *ophalim* mentioned in the Ark Narrative in 1 Sam 4–6 (Maeir 2007). We suggested that this could be interpreted as an example of early Philistine cultic manifestation, remembered in the biblical text, even if the latter is comprised of significant portions that were composed and edited much later.

On the other hand, there is ample reason not to consider the biblical narratives regarding the Philistines and their relations with Israel/Judah in pre- and early Monarchic times in a straightforward manner. An example of this (discussed previously in Maeir 2012) can be seen in the veritable lack of references to the Kingdom

of Gath in the 9th century BCE, save for its destruction by Hazael (2 Kgs 12:17–18). Even though Gath was the largest city, and perhaps the most dominant polity, both in Philistia and in the entire southern Levant, there is no explicit mention of its role in 9th-century politics. Even if one assumes that some of the references to Gath in the David stories (e.g., Naʿaman 2002) reflect a 9th-century BCE situation, the fact that Gath does not figure in any of the biblical depictions of the geopolitical events of the 9th century seems to speak volumes on the lack of historical sources on Philistia during this period when the biblical narratives were being compiled.

A case in point is Faust's (2015b) recent attempt to define the periods in which the Philistines did and did not practice circumcision, based, almost exclusively, on the biblical texts. Repeating a claim that he had suggested elsewhere (Faust 2007: 146), he argues that, although during Iron I the Philistines did not practice circumcision, beginning in early Iron II, the Philistines begin to circumcise. As noted previously (Maier and Hitchcock 2016: 218 n. 5), this argument is fraught with difficulties.

To begin with, the actual archaeological evidence relevant to this discussion is quite limited—and problematic. There are in fact only three finds that contribute to this discussion—from Gezer, Miqne-Ekron, and Tell eš-Šafi/Gath, objects that all are suggested as representations of phalli.

A ceramic object in the shape of an uncircumcised phallus was reported from Gezer (Dever 1986: 115, pl. 60:11; 1998: 148, fig. 79) in a context dated to the 11th century BCE. While Dever suggested that the context in which the object was found was Philistine, King (2006) claimed that the context was “Canaanite/Egyptian.”⁶ Thus, this object is of little use in determining whether the Philistines practiced circumcision in the early Iron Age.

Recently, a limestone object depicting a phallus, from a mid-Iron I context at Tel Miqne-Ekron, has been published (Dothan and Regev 2016). Given that this site has a clear Philistine cultural identity during this period, what the publishers suggest needs to be taken into account (Dothan and Regev 2016: 470)—that this find may very well indicate that the early Iron Age Philistine inhabitants of Ekron practiced circumcision, and only later in the Iron Age did they refrain from the practice, and these later customs are then reflected in the biblical references to the Philistines as being uncircumcised.

As to the objects from Iron IIA Tell eš-Šafi/Gath that have been interpreted as phalli (Maier 2007), if one accepts our interpretation of them, it is not possible to determine whether they are circumcised or not.

With these finds in mind, it is clear that the discussion whether or not the Philistines avoided practicing circumcision in the early Iron Age and began to practice it at a later stage is completely dependent on how one reads the biblical text. This is where Faust's argument becomes particularly problematic: his basic proposition is that a lack of mention of the Philistines as non-circumcised in the so-called “later

6. Whether the site should be identified as Philistine or not, the mixed “character” of the material culture at Gezer, with finds of both Philistine and non-Philistine affiliation, is a cautionary note against claims, as suggested by the Beth Shemesh excavators, of patterns of resistance (manifested by a lack of use of Philistine identified objects by early Iron Age “Canaanites”; e.g., Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011, cf. Maier and Hitchcock 2016), during the early Iron Age.

prophetic texts” in the Bible (in contrast to them being mentioned as such in “earlier” texts) can be seen as evidence of this change in Philistine behavior. However, such a monolithic understanding of a broad corpus of biblical texts—texts that have complex origins, development, and background—hardly fits contemporary understanding of the biblical texts, including prophetic literature (for recent studies of the prophetic literature, see, e.g., Nissinen 2014; Day 2010; Albertz et al. 2012; Macchi et al. 2012; Römer 2012; Jeremias 2013; Kratz 2011, 2013, 2015; Brettlner 2014; Kelle 2014; McEntire 2015; Nagolski 2015; Timmer 2015). Although there is no doubt that there are earlier and later biblical texts, including in the prophetic literature, a broad generalization between early and late, as Faust suggests, is problematic at best. Clearly, each specific text in question must be analyzed separately to discern its components and dating, which cannot be lumped together as Faust does (for criticism of Faust’s methods in the use of biblical texts in his interpretations, see Smith 2014: 379 n. 296).

It should be noted that Faust’s use of other written sources are in this case are also questionable. His claim that Herodotus’ description of the “Syrians of Palestine,” who are in the historian’s description circumcised, refers to the Philistines in Iron Age IIB (Faust 2015b: 280–81) cannot be accepted. Herodotus’s writings date to the 5th century BCE. Even if one accepts that what he writes about Philistia is accurate (and his inaccuracy on many issues is well known), during the 5th century BCE, it was Phoenicians, not Philistines, who populated the southern Coastal Plain of Canaan (e.g., Stern 2001: 407; Stager and Schloen 2008: 9). Thus, this written source is of little relevance to the issue at hand. One wonders whether Faust’s line of argument and his conclusion regarding the Philistine’s commencing to practice circumcision is less related to clear-cut evidence supporting his thesis but rather something that fits his oft-repeated agenda, the contention (e.g., Faust 2013; 2017), that, as of the 10th century BCE, from the time of the Davidic Kingdom, Philistia was politically and culturally dominated by the Kingdom of Judah. According to his view, the result was that Philistine culture lost many of its unique cultural manifestations that had been common in Iron I. As noted above in the discussion of the relations between Philistia and Judah in the Iron IIA, there is little, if any, basis for this contention and, in fact, the available archaeological evidence indicates otherwise.

Summary

As we have attempted to demonstrate, the study of the Philistines and their origins, culture, and relationships with other cultures has gone through major changes in the last few decades. Due in part to a large quantity of finds from the many excavations that have and are being conducted in Philistia and in its surroundings (e.g., Lipschits and Maeir 2017), side by side with new interpretive frameworks, Philistine archaeology is a vibrant and quickly changing field. As research continues in Philistia and on the finds from Philistia, we are convinced that new and exciting understandings of this fascinating culture will continue to flourish, and in a decade or two, we will need once again to rethink our understanding.

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