

Goliath's true hometown found? Lost 3,000-year-old Philistine city emerges beneath Gath

Massive fortifications hidden beneath previously excavated settlement in southern Israel may have inspired biblical traditions about Goliath and other hulks

Ariel David | Jul. 24, 2019 | 2:12 PM

Archaeologists excavating the ancient Philistine city of Gath have uncovered massive 3,000-year-old fortifications of a size unprecedented for their time and place. The discovery could help explain why the Bible names this town as a home to giants, the researchers say.

The monumental ruins emerged in recent months beneath the remains of a later and already well-explored layer of the Philistine settlement, indicating that researchers have stumbled upon an older city that was partially or completely built over by subsequent generations.

If Goliath did once exist, his hometown would apparently have been this earlier city, not the one under archaeological investigation for decades.

The discovery suggests that Gath was at the peak of its power much earlier than previously thought, putting its heyday around the time when the city features heavily in the biblical narrative as a fierce rival of the early Israelites as well as the hometown of Goliath and other outsized biblical warriors.

"I've been digging here for 23 years, and this place still manages to surprise me," says Aren Maeir, a professor of archaeology at Bar-Ilan University who leads the expedition in Gath. "All along we had this older, giant city that was hiding just a meter under the city we were digging."

Located in southern Israel, the site is known today as Tell es-Safi. As the name suggests, it is a tell – a mound largely made up of the stratified ruins of multiple settlements left over by millennia of human habitation.

Finds at Tell es-Safi range from remains dated to the 5th millennium B.C.E. to a medieval Crusader castle and a modern Arab village destroyed in Israel's 1948 War of Independence. Most scholars accept the identification of this site as the biblical Gath, in large part because of its location and the major Philistine-era remains found there.

Gath is mentioned in the Bible more times than any of the five major Philistine cities (the other four being Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza). Gath is said to have hosted the Ark of the Covenant for a brief time after the Philistines captured it from the Israelites (1 Samuel 5:8) and it is where David

sought refuge twice from king Saul, eventually becoming a mercenary for the city's ruler, Achish (1 Samuel 21 and 1 Samuel 27).

A hidden city emerges

Archaeologists have been digging Philistine Gath for decades, uncovering temples, mud brick houses and massive oil presses that paint the picture of a bustling city sprawling over 500 dunams (50 hectares) with a population of around 5,000-10,000.

“This was the largest Philistine city and probably one of the largest in the Iron Age Levant,” Maeir says. “Larger cities were only found outside the Levant, such as in Egypt and Mesopotamia.”

Those Philistine remains were dated to a period called the Iron Age IIA, roughly from the end of the 10th century B.C.E. to the late ninth century B.C.E., when the city was destroyed in a conflagration, probably in the conquest of the area by the Aramean king Hazael around 830 B.C.E. – an event recorded in the Bible (2 Kings 12:17). Gath never recovered from that blow: it was later rebuilt as a small Judahite settlement but was destroyed again by the Assyrians at the end of the eighth century B.C.E.

Until now, researchers thought that Philistine Gath flourished mainly during that fairly brief window between the late 10th century B.C.E. and Hazael's arrival, even though that period is a bit later than most of the biblical stories in which the city features. (If we trust the biblical chronology, Saul and David, who so frequently had dealings with the Gittites, would have lived in the late 11th-early 10th centuries B.C.E.)

“Up until now we thought that the city from the Iron IIA, the one that was destroyed by Hazael, was the largest and most important period in Gath,” says Maeir. “This year we got a different story.”

Over the summer's digging campaign, which ended last week, archaeologists decided to investigate the foundations of large terraces located in Gath's lower city, which was only inhabited during the Iron Age. The dig revealed that those terraces were resting on massive fortifications and larger buildings made of huge stone boulders and fired bricks – a method that makes them stronger than traditional sun-dried mud bricks.

In some areas these walls are four meters thick or more, and the pottery associated with them dates to the early Iron Age, to the 11th century B.C.E. or possibly earlier. No comparably colossal structures are known in the rest of the Levant from this period – or even from the later incarnation of Philistine Gath, Maeir says.

“Whatever it is, it’s enormous,” Maeir told Haaretz during a tour of the site last week. “It’s as if the site of Gath in the early Iron Age dwarfed the later city.”

These monumental structures dovetail with the image of Gath as a major regional power already in the early Iron Age – a picture that can be evinced from the Bible and the archaeological evidence in the surrounding region. Settlements in the nearby Elah valley, such as Azekah and Khirbet Qeiyafa (which depending on whom you ask may or may not have been early Judahite sites) show signs of destruction during this period, suggesting that Gath was aggressively preserving its local hegemony, Maeir says.

The walls David saw

The jury is still out on how much historical truth there is to the biblical stories of the great monarchy ruled by Saul, David and Solomon. But if an Israelite leader named David really did seek refuge in Gath from the jealous king Saul, then the walls recently uncovered there would have been the ones he saw as he entered the city.

On his first visit, it would have been upon these fortifications that the future king of Israel, fearing that the Gittite king Achish would harm him, feigned madness “and scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard.” (1 Samuel 21:13)

Of course, when it comes to David, few remember the story about him unimpressively drooling on the gates of Gath, and everybody knows of his earlier, more glorious exploit of defeating Goliath, the ginormous Philistine champion who hailed from that same city (1 Samuel 17:4).

An inscription found on a potsherd at Tell es-Safi and dated to the ninth century B.C.E. (more than a century after David’s time) does mention names that are etymologically similar to Goliath’s. But the so-called “Goliath sherd” only proves that this may have been indeed a common Philistine name – not that there was a famous champion of this name who went mano-a-mano with David at the turn of the 11th century B.C.E or that this warrior was unusually sized.

By the way, Goliath is far from the only hulk to populate the pages of the Hebrew holy text. The Bible is pretty adamant that all kinds of mysterious gigantic people – “Rephaim,” “Anakim” and others – used to walk the earth and that their last descendants could be found amongst the Philistines, particularly in Gath (see for example Joshua 11:22 – *“There were no Anakim left in the land of the sons of Israel; only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod some remained,”* or 2 Samuel 21:16-22).

Many biblical scholars today are convinced that the so-called Deuteronomistic History – the books from Deuteronomy through Kings – was put in writing centuries after most of the events it describes, probably in the late 7th century B.C.E. under the Judahite king Josiah.

So the story of the early Israelites is best described as a collection of previous traditions, oral and written, ancient myths and deep historical memories often adapted to fit the ideological and theological purposes of its authors.

And where do Goliath and the other giants fit in this jumble of myth, tradition and history?

“Many of the biblical texts must be understood as allegory,” notes Maeir. “We have excavated several tombs in Gath, and we definitely haven’t found the bones of particularly large people, so what is the origin of the tradition that giants lived here?”

The answer, the archaeologist theorizes, may lie in the monumental scale of the newly-emerged city from the early Iron Age, which could have inspired stories about proportionally large inhabitants even long after Philistine Gath was no more.

We know that after Hazael destroyed the city its ruins were still known and impressive enough to be mentioned in the book of Amos, which is thought to have originated in the eighth century B.C.E. – about a century after the Aramean conquest.

In this text, the Prophet Amos holds up the destruction of Gath as an example of hubris punished by God and a warning of impending doom for the prideful leaders of the Israelites (Amos 6).

If they inspired pessimistic prophecies, those monumental remains may have also been the source of other traditions, says Maeir.

“If there were enormous ruins sitting around, that’s the best way to get stories about giants started,” he says. Such a link was not unusual in the ancient world, he notes. The classical Greeks, for example, looked at the remains of massive, centuries-old fortifications at Mycenae and other Bronze Age sites and called them “Cyclopean walls” believing that only giants like the mythical Cyclops could lift such large blocks of stone.

Many of the biblical stories that feature unusually large people are connected to the conquest of Canaan by Joshua and the Israelites, notes Thomas Römer, a renowned expert in the Hebrew Bible and professor at the College de France and the University of Lausanne. In Numbers 13, for example, the spies sent by Moses describe the Holy Land as a country of daunting cities and giant

people. These traditions mainly serve to aggrandize the glory of God and the Israelites for their victories and to create a clear chronological distinction between the time before and after the conquest, says Römer, who did not take part in the research at Gath.

It is interesting that in the post-conquest stories, the giants who have survived Joshua's onslaught are confined to the lands of the Philistines, and this may indeed be linked to the magnitude and sophistication of that culture.

"We always have to be very cautious in our interpretation but this can be related to the size of Philistine cities like Gath and to this very impressive civilization that the Hebrews were familiar with," Römer tells Haaretz. "When you are confronted with such large structures you need to explain them: so why not giants?"

Why two cities?

Only small sections of the early Iron Age city at Gath have been uncovered so far, and Maier's team aim to dig up more over the coming years. One question they hope to answer is how old that town actually is, and whether it goes back to the early 12th century B.C.E. – when the Philistine culture first coalesced on the coastal plain that is split today between southern Israel and the Gaza Strip.

Another mystery is why the Philistines decided to abandon their swanky city from the early Iron Age and build another, slightly more modest settlement on top of it, while also changing the entire urban grid (the Iron IIA buildings align with the cardinal points, while the older city has a 45 degree tilt). This massive restructuring does not mean that the city was conquered or destroyed.

The book of Chronicles does say that David eventually seized his sometime-enemy-sometime-ally Gath (1 Chronicles 18), and that Solomon's son Rehoboam fortified it for Judah (2 Chronicles 11). But this biblical text is believed by scholars to have been written much later – perhaps in the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. – so those details may be more of an aggrandizement of ancient Israel than a historical account.

Archaeologically, the brief Judahite occupation happened centuries after David's time and there is no evidence that the massive early Iron Age city was destroyed or that Gath was anything but a powerful and prosperous Philistine town until it was razed by the Arameans, Maier says.

"So we still don't know a lot about why a new city was built on top of the old one, with a different orientation for the buildings," the archaeologist says. "But one thing is certain, we are slowly awakening a sleeping giant."

