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A New Interpretation of the Term *ʿopalim* (עפלים) in the Light of Recent Archaeological Finds from Philistia*

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Abstract

In the light of recent archaeological finds from Iron Age Philistia and comparative evidence from Aegean and ancient Near Eastern cults, a new interpretation is suggested for the term *ʿopalim* (עפלים), mentioned in the 'ark narrative' (e.g. 1 Sam. 5.6; 6.5). Although most often interpreted as relating to 'haemorrhoids' or the bubonic plague, it is suggested that this, in fact, is a term referring to an affliction of the Philistines' *membra virile*.

Keywords: Philistine, Iron Age, cult, religion, archaeology, Levant, phallus, ark.

Introduction

The biblical narrative about the wanderings of the ark in Philistia provides a fascinating glimpse into the biblical writer's views on various aspects of Philistine culture. Predominant among these are descriptions

* I would like to thank A. Faust, S. Paul and M.Z. Brettler for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this study, and E. Sachar for her editorial skills.

relating to aspects of Philistine political structure and religion. In addition, the divine punishment inflicted on the Philistines is elaborated upon throughout the story (1 Sam. 5.1-12).

One of the least understood aspects of this fascinating story is the nature of the disease that afflicted the Philistines. Clearly of a serious, even deadly, nature, it involved various phenomena, including mice/rats and the poorly understood *‘opalim* (עִפְלִים), 1 Sam. 5.6; 6.5; see as well Deut. 28.27). The latter term is referred to both as the affliction itself and a symptom thereof, but in 1 Sam. 6.5, the text also mentions the ‘golden *‘opalim*’ that were fabricated by the Philistines.

Biblical commentators, ancient, medieval and modern alike, have attempted to understand the disease that struck the Philistines (for discussions, including summaries of various views by different commentators, see, e.g., Smith 1899: 40-41; Hertzberg 1964: 54-55; Ackroyd 1971: 55-56; Mauchline 1971: 76, 78; Stoebe 1973: 140; McCarter 1980: 118-26; Klein 1983: 50-51; Abramski and Garsiel 1985: 74; Bar-Efrat 1996: 98-101; Birch 1998: 1008). Two major interpretations have been suggested: that it was either the plague (or related diseases), or, following Josephus, a type of dysentery. Central to this identification of the nature of the disease is the interpretation of the enigmatic term *‘opalim*, which since the early stages of biblical interpretation has been understood in various ways. Although *‘opalim* appears in the *Kethib* in the MT, it is supplanted by *tehorim* (טְהוֹרִים) in the *Qere*. Most commentators suggest that the latter, which apparently means ‘haemorrhoids’, is an interpretation of the former, possibly as a euphemism. In the various translations, *‘opalim* appears to be akin to ‘swellings’, and similar interpretations related to swollen/elevated appear in the standard dictionaries (e.g. BDB, 779; KB, 814), based on parallel words in Hebrew, Aramaic, and cognate languages.¹ Accordingly, the various attempts that have been made to identify the Philistines’ disease see the *‘opalim* as a major symptom of a specific medical condition, and appropriate diagnoses have been suggested (e.g. Shrewsbury 1964; Preuss 1971: 175-78; Sussman 1992: 9; Breir 2004: 153).

1. Although most commentators have interpreted the term as referring to ‘swellings’, two alternative suggestions can be noted. Several scholars have suggested an etymological connection to the Greek deity Apollo Smintheus (e.g. Geyer 1981; Margalith 1983; 1994: 35-41 [with further bibliography]), while Garbini (1997: 214-15) has suggested that the word refers to a throne, relating it to the well-known Ashdoda figurines of the Philistines, depicting a woman sitting on, or combined with, a chair.

In this brief study, I would like to suggest a new interpretation of the term *'opalim*, one that combines two central elements in the ark narrative—religion and sickness—and which, I believe, can be connected to recent archaeological finds from Philistia.

Relevant Archaeological Evidence

In the past few decades, archaeological work at major Philistine sites has provided compelling evidence for defining Philistine material culture—its sources, classification and development—adding much to the earlier syntheses (such as those represented in T. Dothan 1982; Brug 1985). As the data from the more recent excavations is analyzed and published, more and more aspects of this fascinating culture are revealed. Of particular importance are the excavations that have been conducted in the main cities of the Philistines, namely Ashdod (M. Dothan and Freedman 1967; M. Dothan 1971, 1993; M. Dothan and Porath 1982, 1993), Ashkelon (Stager 1991, 1996, 2001), Tel Miqne-Ekron (e.g. T. Dothan 1998, 2000; T. Dothan and Gitin 1993; Gitin 1989, 1997, 1998, 2004), and, most recently, Tell es-Sâfi/Gath (e.g. Maeir 2001, 2003, 2004a; Maeir and Ehrlich 2001),² but also at secondary Philistine sites such as Tel Qasile (Mazar 1980, 1985).

Among the many new vistas that have been opened through these excavations, aspects of the religion and cultic practices of the Philistines are of special interest. These discoveries include an inscription naming a hitherto unknown deity (Gitin, Dothan and Naveh 1997; see also Demsky 1997; Schäffer-Lichtenberger 1998, 2000), other cult-related inscriptions and various objects (e.g. Mazar 1980, 1985; Gitin 1992, 1993, 2003; T. Dothan 1995: 49-53; 2002; Gitin and Cogan 1999; Maeir and Shai 2005; Ben-Shlomo, in press). Other studies have attempted to elucidate further the Philistine pantheon, suggesting specific identities of some of the Philistine deities (e.g. Mazar 1985: 129-31; Singer 1992; Schäffer-Lichtenberger 1998, 2000; Yasur-Landau 2001).

The late sixth-century BCE destruction of the Philistine city of Ashkelon, which all agree was a result of Nebuchadnezzar's 604 BCE campaign to Philistia, represents the end of the developmental sequence of Philistine culture in Canaan (Stager 1996; see also Stone 1995). In this

2. The recent excavations at Gaza, the fifth city of the Philistine Pentapolis to be excavated, have yet to reveal significant remains from the Philistine stages of this important site, apart from a limited exposure of the late eighth- to late seventh-century BCE levels at the site; see Burdajewicz 2000; Humbert and Sadeq 2000: 106, 112.

destruction level, a cache of seven bronze *situlae* (vial-shaped vessels) with representations in relief of Egyptian-style deities was discovered (Stager 1996: 68*-70*, Fig. 13; see here, Fig. 1). Based on a comparison with similar Egyptian iconography and cultic practices, Stager suggested that these vessels had a phallic connotation and were most probably associated with a cult of symbolic revivification (1996: 69*).³ It should be noted that these vessels seem to depict uncircumcised, non-erect *membra virile*.



Figure 1. Cache of bronze phallic-shaped *situlae* from late Iron Age Philistine Ashkelon (reproduced with the permission of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, courtesy of Lawrence E. Stager©).

In the 2004 season of excavations at Tell es-Sâfi/Gath, the extensive late ninth- early eighth-century BCE destruction level (Local Stratum A3 [formerly termed ‘Temporary Stratum 4’]) continued to be exposed. This level is most probably connected to the capture and subsequent destruction of Philistine Gath by Hazael, king of Aram Damascus (2 Kgs 12.18; Maeir 2004a) and has yielded a rich assortment of material culture dating to the late Iron Age IIA,⁴ representing the middle phase of the developmental sequence of Philistine culture (Maeir 2001, in press; Ben-Shlomo, Shai and Maeir 2004).

3. I thank L. Stager for graciously allowing me to use the photograph of these objects.

4. I believe that the Iron Age IIA in the southern Levant spans the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, and Temporary Stratum 4 at Tell es-Sâfi/Gath represents the later stage of the Iron Age IIA (see Ben-Shlomo, Shai and Maeir 2004: 2; see also Mazar 1999: 37-42; Herzog and Singer-Avitz 2004).

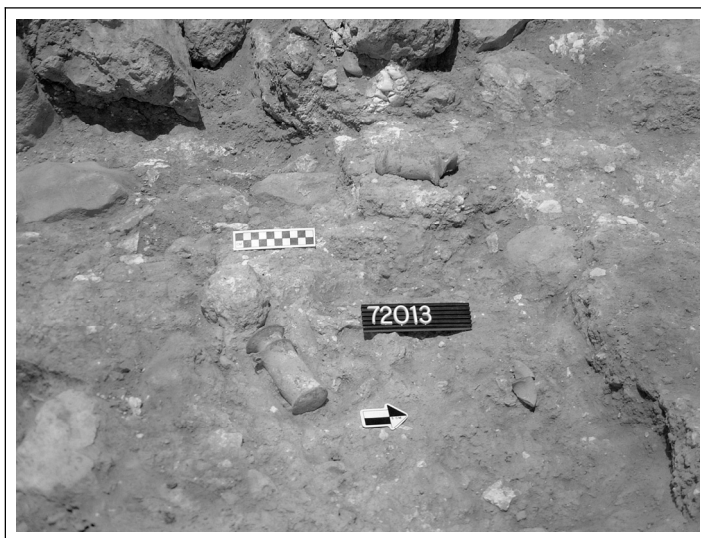


Figure 2. *The two ceramic phallic-shaped situlae in situ in the late Iron Age IIA (late ninth/early eighth century BCE) Local Stratum A3 destruction level, Tell es-Sâfi/Gath, Area A (Aren M. Maeir©, Tell es-Sâfi/Gath Archaeological Project).*

Among the hundreds of well-preserved ceramic vessels found in this stratum were two unique *situlae* discovered in the 2004 season (Figs. 2-3). The vessels were uncovered in close proximity to each other in the collapse debris associated with the aforementioned destruction.⁵ Both are hollow, cylindrical in shape, and have a flaring plain rim, a bulbous-like thickening at the closed end, and two small horizontal, knob-like pierced handles on the upper part of the vessel, attached at the join between the body and neck, slightly below the rim. The vessels have a red wash (not burnished), on which two sets of painted decoration of red and white parallel lines were applied, one on the neck between the rim and the handles, and one in the middle of the body.

5. The two vessels were found in the excavations in Field A, Area A2, Square 223/89B, Locus 72013, supervised by staff member Rona Avissar. The registration numbers are Basket 720043 and Basket 720037 and their dimensions were 11.5 cm long and 5 cm in diameter at the rim and 11 cm long and 4.5 cm in diameter at the rim, respectively. I would like to thank the Tell es-Sâfi/Gath Archaeological Project staff, especially R. Avissar, J. Uziel and A. Zukerman, for assisting in the preparation of this study. Photographs are by V. Naikhin and drawings by J. Rudman.

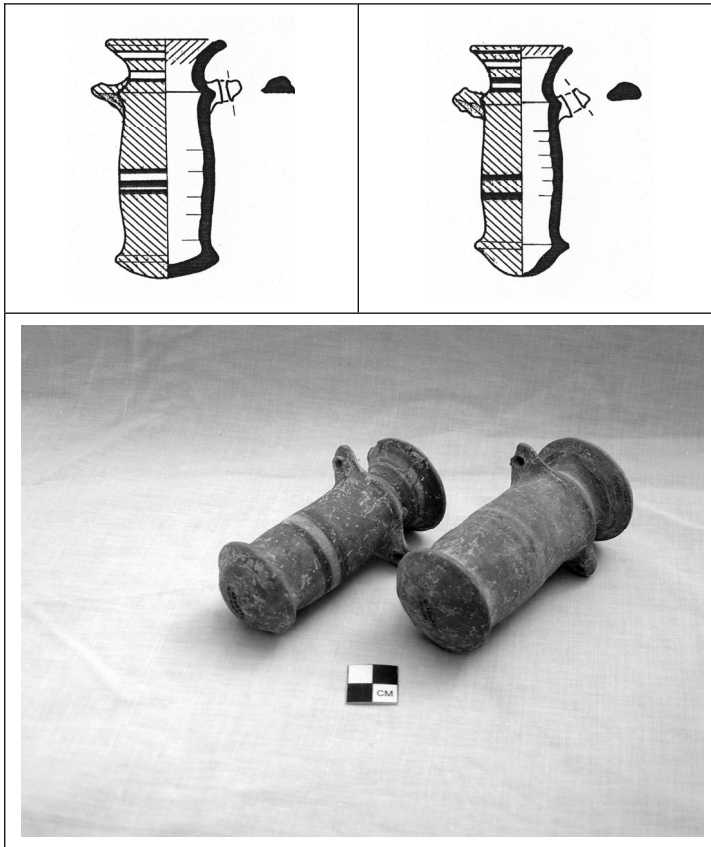


Figure 3. Drawings and photographs of the two ceramic phallic-shaped situlae from Tell es-Sâfi/Gath Local Stratum A3 (Aren M. Maeir©, Tell es-Sâfi/Gath Archaeological Project).

The painted decoration is quite similar (or even identical) to the painted decoration that appears on the ‘Late Philistine Decorated Ware’ (LPDW, formerly known as ‘Ashdod Ware’) typical of Philistine material culture during the Iron Age IIA–IIB (Ben-Shlomo, Shai and Maeir 2004), except that the red wash is not burnished (although it should be noted that not all of the vessels classified as LPDW are burnished). Both vessels appear to depict *ithyphallii* (erect penises),⁶ which, due to their apparent physiological state, do not allow us to distinguish if they are circumcised or not. It should be noted that although these two phallic objects from

6. This has been confirmed by several urologists who have been kind enough to examine the objects.

Tell es-Sâfi/Gath were not found in a formal cultic structure, several other cult-related objects were found in their vicinity, which may indicate that they derive from a 'cultic-corner'. This may not be the only 'cultic corner' within otherwise non-cultic contexts (domestic or industrial) in this stratum, and similar cult-related 'corners' in non-cultic contexts are known from other Philistine sites as well (e.g. Gitin 1993: 250; 2003; Stager 1996: 66*).

The presence of phallic-shaped vessels in a well-defined Iron Age context associated with Philistine culture is a clear indication of the symbolic significance that such vessels had in the Philistine worldview. Quite obviously, the male reproductive organ is of importance in all human cultures.⁷ While such depictions are relatively common in Egyptian religious iconography,⁸ they are very rare in ancient Semitic religious and symbolic iconography.⁹ On the other hand, phallic symbolism is well known in early Greek cultures and occurs in various forms.¹⁰

Taking into account that there are very few phallic representations in the ancient Near East, while, in contrast, they are common in Aegean/early Greek cultures, this would seem to have special significance regarding our understanding of Philistine culture. As is well known, it is highly likely that the Philistine culture (or at least, significant portions of it) originated in the Aegean cultural milieu. Without recapitulating this oft-discussed topic, it can be said that major aspects of their material culture exhibit strong connections with the Aegean cultures of the second millennium BCE.¹¹ Thus, perhaps the phallic-shaped vessels from Tell es-Sâfi/Gath and Ashkelon should be understood as an additional example of the Aegean antecedents of certain aspects of the Philistine cult.¹²

7. On the general cultural symbolism and significance of the phallus, see, e.g., Lacan 2001: 318-19; Meskell and Joyce 2003: 103-11.

8. See, e.g., Lichtheim 1947: 177; Ogdon 1985-86; Manniche 1987: 48, Figs. 38-40; Bianchi 1989; Pinch 1993: 235-45, Plates 52A, 53; Montserrat 1996: 172-74; Meskell 2004: 140-42.

9. For example, ithyphallic figurines are virtually non-existent in the various North-West Semitic cultures (see, e.g., Negbi 1976; Holland 1977; Badre 1980; Seeden 1980; Kletter 1996).

10. See, e.g., Burkert 1985: 104; Keuls 1985: 65-86. See further discussion below on the Greek phallic *ex-votos*.

11. See, e.g., T. Dothan 1989, 1995, 2003; Barako 2000; Yasur-Landau 2002, 2003. The arguments for a non-Aegean origin of the Philistines (e.g. Drews 1998; Sherratt 1998) essentially fly in the face of the available evidence (see especially Barako 2000).

12. As presented, e.g., in T. Dothan 2003.

Interpreting the Term *ʿopalim*

With the above in mind, let us return to the question of the identification and interpretation of the term *ʿopalim* in the biblical text. I would like to suggest an interpretation along the lines that it refers to the male sexual organ, both in the case of a body part that was afflicted during the ‘Philistine Plague’ and that which is said to be imitated in gold in 1 Sam. 6.5, 11.

Admittedly, interpreting the term *ʿopalim* as referring to the male sexual organ is somewhat problematic, since this is not the word used for this organ in other instances, either in Hebrew or in other Semitic languages. On the other hand, however, the alternative interpretations (e.g. ‘swellings’) do not have many comparanda either. In addition, the cognate word *ʿpl* (*ophel*) has a meaning of high, lofty, raised, etc. (e.g. Jean and Hoftijzer 1965: 219; BDB, 779; KB, 2004: 814-15), which would fit well as a euphemistic reference to the male sexual organ.¹³

I believe that this interpretation can be supported by additional arguments. One is that Saul’s daring David to bring him Philistine foreskins is not only related to the fact that the Philistines were considered an uncircumcised people,¹⁴ but was meant literally, ‘to hit the Philistines below the belt’, as well as being a pejorative statement about their cultic practice. Needless to say, if this interpretation is correct, the Philistines were struck in a very painful and awkward place, which presents the Philistines in a rather ridiculous light in the ark narrative.¹⁵

This is supported by the archaeological evidence as well. In addition to the above-mentioned separate groups of well-dated and well-provenanced phallic-shaped objects found in Philistine contexts at Ashkelon and Tell es-Sâfi/Gath, various phallic-shaped vessels and *ex-votos* (and/or

13. On sexual euphemisms in the Bible, see, e.g., Pope 1992: 720-23; Schorch 2000: 220-25; Paul 2002.

14. Most scholars agree that the Philistines did not practice circumcision and that this was a central distinguishing trait among the Philistines when compared, *inter alia*, to the Israelites (see, e.g., T. Dothan and Cohn 1994: 63-65; Garbini 1997: 206-208; Machinist 2000: 63, 68). Recently, A. Faust (2006) has suggested that this is so only in the earlier part of the Iron Age and that subsequently the Philistines did start to practice circumcision. If the phallic-shaped *situlae* from Ashkelon are in fact local products, and since they appear to be depictions of uncircumcised penises, they may indicate that the Philistines continued to abstain from circumcision until the end of the Iron Age.

15. Bentzen 1948: 46 already noted that a central motif in the ark narrative is ridicule towards the Philistines due to their somewhat comically perceived predicament. See now as well Gordon 2004: 27-31.

depictions of these) are known from sundry cultic contexts in the early Greek world. Examples of this are seen from at least one Bronze Age Aegean context (e.g. Rutkowski 1986: 87, Fig. 110), from the Graeco-Roman cult of Asklepius (e.g. Forsén 1996: 45-47, 55-56, Plates 24-29; van Straten 2000: 203-204; see as well Slane and Dickie 1993¹⁶), as well as in the rites pertaining to the Cypriote Aphrodite at Alt-Paphos (Rantidi forest).¹⁷

To this one can add that in the Graeco-Roman cult of Kybele, a central element of the ritual was the self-castration of the *galloi* priests, re-enacting the castration and death of Attis, Kybele's lover (e.g. Burkert 1987: 6). This is of considerable interest, since Singer (1992, 2000) has quite convincingly argued that Dagon, the main deity of the Philistines, is to be associated with Kybele (identifying Dagon as a female deity), and that this deity was brought by the Philistines to Canaan from the Aegean and/or Anatolian milieu. In turn, Kybele is at times identified with Aphrodite, whose relevance to this issue is mentioned above (e.g. Graf 1999: 66-67). This being so, the possibility of a similar Philistine cultic praxis is not hard to imagine. Thus, it appears that the two groups of phallic-shaped objects from Ashkelon and Tell es-Sâfi/Gath would best be understood in this light, as *ex-voto* or cultic objects relating to the male sexual organ.

The reference in 1 Sam. 5.6 to golden *ʿopalim* clearly indicates a recognizable object. Interpreting these as golden replicas of 'swellings' (haemorrhoids) is somewhat problematic, since it is difficult to imagine how such an 'object' would be depicted, not to mention that none of the various known Philistine cult-related objects fit such an interpretation. On the other hand, understanding the *ʿopalim* as related to the male sexual organ and the golden *ʿopalim* as being an imitation thereof has, as we have seen, excellent parallels in the archaeological record.¹⁸

16. Thanks to A. Zukerman for referring me to this study. The two vessels described by Slane and Dickie (1993: Plates 85-86) serve, morphologically, and to a certain extent, conceptually, as the closest parallels to the two vessels from Tell es-Sâfi/Gath, despite over a millennium that separates them.

17. Maier and Karageorghis 1984: 371-72; Bazemore 2000: 112; 2002: 187-88; Young 2005: 32 (thanks to A. Zukerman for referring me to this article). Note that the cult of the Cypriote Aphrodite may have had its origins in Mycenaean culture—see, e.g., Maier and Karageorghis 1984: 182-83; Graf 1999: 66. Washbourne (2000: 273-75), identifies Aphrodite/Aštarte as 'member loving'—connecting it to the myth of the severed genitals of Uranus.

18. Regarding the 'golden mice' referred to in 1 Sam. 6.5, one should mention a rather questionable find reported many years ago. Von Schick (1893: 296-97) and subsequently Thomas (1894) discussed a group of six metal figurines, seemingly depicting mice or rats,

To sum up, I suggest that the term *‘opalim* mentioned in the ark narrative in 1 Samuel 5 and 6 is a euphemistic reference to the Philistine male sexual organ that was afflicted in some manner by the ‘Philistine Plague’, causing much discomfort—and ridicule—for the Philistines.¹⁹ In an attempt to alleviate this malady (using a sympathetic ritual, possibly similar to the copper snake ritual depicted in Num 21.4-9; see, e.g., Joines 1974: 87-89; Hendel 1999: 746), they fabricated golden *‘opalim*, which are to be understood as golden *ex-votos* in the shape of phalli.²⁰ It would appear, then, that the biblical writer had a clear image and knowledge of this aspect of Iron Age Philistine cult and beliefs²¹ and incorporated it quite harmoniously, if somewhat humorously, into the ark narrative.²²

located at the time in a private collection in Jaffa and supposedly originally found by peasants in the region of Philistia. Although both authors suggested a connection to the ‘golden mice’ of 1 Sam. 6.5, this should be viewed with caution, since the dating and, indeed, the very authenticity of these objects cannot be ascertained.

19. Accordingly, I would translate וַיִּךְ אֹתָם בַּעֲפָלִים (e.g. 1 Sam. 5.6) as ‘Strike them in their penises’, implying either that they were struck physically in this organ, or possibly referring to the disease that caused this specific inflection. A perusal of the biblical use of הִכָּה and בָּ demonstrates that this combination is used in an instrumental meaning (such as הִכָּה לְפִי חֶרֶב, ‘smote by sword’ [1 Sam. 22.19]), as indicating geographic location (such as הִכִּיתָ בְּעַמְקֵי הָאֵלָה, ‘smote in the Elah Valley’ [1 Sam. 21.10]), or even to identify the victim (such as וַיִּךְ בַּפְּלִשְׁתִּים, ‘smote the Philistines’ [2 Sam. 32.10]). Thus, the suggested translation and interpretation has syntactic parallels.

20. This interpretation may be relevant to the understanding of *zlmv zkr* (צַלְמֵי זָכָר) mentioned in Ezek. 16.17. Although most scholars have suggested that this term be interpreted as ‘male images’ (e.g. Zimmerli 1979: 326, 344; Greenberg 1986: 271, 280; Schroer 1987: 189-95; Allen 1994: 239; Block 1997: 488-89), the possibility that it refers to ‘phallic images’ has been raised (e.g. Ehrlich 1912: 55; Eichrodt 1970: 207; Carley 1974: 100; Zevit 2001: 564), and the suggested interpretation presented in this study would seem to support the latter meaning (see also Isa. 57.8; Koenen 1988: 46-49; S. Paul has informed me that in his forthcoming commentary on the book of Isaiah [in Hebrew, in the Miqra le-Yisrael series], he has shown that the Hebrew term *zkr* has Akkadian parallels referring to both masculinity/sexual potency as well as the sexual member itself). One must note though that Ezekiel was not referring specifically to Philistine cultic practices. I would like to thank M. Haiman for suggesting this possible connection to the passage in Ezekiel.

21. This should be seen as yet another example of the intimate knowledge of various aspects of Philistine material culture that is reflected in numerous biblical texts. Clearly, this is an indication that these texts are based on Iron Age materials and traditions, steeped in cultural modes that no longer existed during the Persian and Hellenistic periods, thus precluding a late dating for these texts. Similar arguments have been presented for an Iron Age dating of many of the biblical references to the Philistines, whether relating to the period’s early (e.g. Maeir 2004a, 2004b; Stager 2006) or later (Finkelstein 2002) stages.

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Thus, suggestions to date large sections of the biblical texts that relate to the Philistines, to the Exilic, post-Exilic, or Hellenistic periods are untenable (for late dating, see, e.g., Van Seters 1983).

22. Just as this article was going to press, an additional group of cultic objects was found in the late ninth-century BCE destruction level at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Stratum A3) during the summer 2007 season of excavations. The group included seven additional phallic-shaped vessels, along with other cultic related items. This can be seen as additional evidence of the importance of phallic symbolism in Philistine culture and religion.

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