

THE SUSAN & ROGER HERTOOG EDITION OF SAMUEL

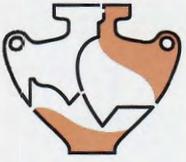
תנ"ך קורן ארץ ישראל
THE KOREN
TANAKH
OF THE LAND
OF ISRAEL

SAMUEL • שמואל



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KOREN PUBLISHERS JERUSALEM



The Philistines

The Philistines are well-known from the biblical text as neighbors and enemies of the Israelites and Judahites throughout most of the Iron Age – the era parallel to the period of the Judges and the First Temple (ca. 1200–586 BCE).

Archaeological finds were discovered in the area called Philistia in biblical geography – that is, in the southern coastal plain of modern-day Israel, at Iron Age sites. Many finds have been identified from the Philistine Pentapolis – i.e., the cities of Aza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gat. Excavations at Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gat revealed extensive remains of Philistine culture.

The origins of the Philistines

The Philistines are described in the Tanakh as coming from regions outside of Canaan – specifically Kaftor, which is probably ancient Crete (Amos 9:7). Throughout the Tanakh, they are viewed as being unrelated to the native Canaanite population.

Scholars long assumed that the Philistine population and their traditions derived from some as-yet-unidentified location in the Aegean. Previously, scholars thought that they migrated en masse (ca. 1200 BCE) and replaced the indigenous population along the southern coastal plain.

Current research suggests a more complex picture. Archaeological remains of the early Philistines indicate that their origins are diverse, from various areas in the Aegean, Cyprus, southern Anatolia, and even the Balkans.

Material culture – distinct, but locally influenced

Archaeology also shows that the migrants and local populations mixed, creating a hybrid material culture.

Philistine pottery is distinctive and is an excellent tool for mirroring the overall development and change of the Philistines' material culture. Finds from the early Iron Age include locally made Mycenaean pottery, similar to pottery from Bronze Age Greece and surrounding regions – indicating that foreign traditions were brought to Philistia. As the Iron Age progressed, Philistine pottery changed, developing its own unique styles.

In the latest stage of Philistine history – with its "Ashdod Ware" or "Late Philistine Decorated Ware" during Iron Age IIA (10th century BCE) – one can see a combination of Philistine forms and decorations together with those of the Phoenicians, who occupied the coast further north.

The Philistines also had a unique diet and culture of food preparation. For example, most Philistine sites indicate a preference for pig and dog meat, something not common in Israelite and Canaanite cuisine. Similarly, the jugs and hearths they used for cooking were different in Philistia than in other parts of the region.

Religious practice

Archaeological finds of the Philistine cult and religion are extensive. Aspects such as religious architecture, and the names

of gods such as Dagon and Patgaya, show foreign influences – while other facets reflect the influence of local traditions, such as the use of horned altars.

Interestingly, the architecture of the temples of Tel Qasile (in Tel Aviv) and Gat have two pillars in the center of the structures – similar to what is described in the biblical story of Shimshon, who knocked down the pillars of the Philistine Dagon temple in Aza (Judges 16).

Political structure

The biblical text describes Philistine rulers using the term *seren*, which is probably a non-Semitic loanword brought by Philistine non-local components.

Yet many aspects of the Philistine political structure are far from clear. Scholars debate whether the five cities of the Pentapolis were independent or if they had some joint political structure.

Bi-directional cultural influence

Because there are so few inscriptions from Philistia, much of what is known is derived from Assyrian and Babylonian sources, as well as the Tanakh – where the Philistines are usually described as Israel's enemies.

Alongside military confrontations, there are hints that the Philistines had a network of complex neighborly relations with Israel – as mirrored in the Shimshon cycle (Judges 13–16), where Shimshon fights and kills Philistines but also interacts with them and marries a Philistine woman.

This composite relationship can be seen in the archaeological remains as well, where there is evidence of bi-directional cultural influence – of Levantine influence on various aspects of Philistine culture, and of Philistine influence on facets of Judahite and other Levantine cultures. Throughout the Iron Age, a slow, steady process of change can be seen in Philistine culture. The Philistines became more like their neighbors yet retained a distinct cultural identity. This suggests that Philistine culture, by definition, was an “entangled” culture, one that combined local and foreign components to create a unique culture of its own that continued to transform throughout the Iron Age.

The city of Gat – late Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA (11th to 10th century BCE)

During the early Iron Age, all five of the Philistine cities were settled, but only Ashdod and Gat were large in comparison to other sites in the land of Israel at the time.

Gat, home of the biblical Golyat, was the Philistines’ primary city from the eleventh through the ninth centuries BCE – parallel, more or less, to the time of the early Judahite monarchy (10th century BCE), including David and Shlomo.

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Due to Gat’s dominant position, the Judahite monarchy could not expand westward into Philistia. Following the destruction of Gat by the Aramean king Hazael around 830 BCE (II Kings 12:18), the four other cities continued to prosper, but Gat’s destruction enabled the Judahite kingdom to begin to expand in that direction.

Conquest of Philistia

During the mid-8th to mid-7th century



➤ A two-horned stone altar from a 9th century BCE temple in the lower city of Gat, which was destroyed by Hazael of Gat, ca. 830 BCE

BCE (the Neo-Assyrian period), Philistia prospered. Ashkelon became an important port and Ekron became the largest producer of olive oil in the eastern Mediterranean.

Only with the Babylonian conquest of Philistia around 604 BCE – during which the remaining Philistine cities were destroyed by Nevukhadnetzar and their inhabitants exiled to Babylonia – do we see the sudden end of Philistine culture. Within about 200 years, this population assimilated with the local Mesopotamian population – and the Philistines, as a people, ceased to exist.

That said, the term Philistia – as a reference to the region in which the Philistines lived during the Iron Age – continued to be used, eventually leading to the entire land of Israel being called Palestine starting in the Roman period (in the 2nd century CE) and onward.

Inscriptions

Not many inscriptions have been found at Philistine sites. From the early stages of the

Iron Age, almost nothing is known about the script they used and the language they spoke. What is clear is that from about the 10th century BCE and onward, and in particular in the 8th and 7th century BCE (toward the end of the “First Temple period”), for written communications the Philistines used an alphabetic script, similar to the Phoenician script, which was very similar to Biblical Hebrew.

Two inscriptions are of particular importance. A very early inscription from Tell es-Safi/Gat, dating to the 10th century BCE, has two names (*alwat and walat*), both clearly of non-Semitic origin and are somewhat similar to the name Golyat. An inscription from the temple at Ekron (late 7th century BCE; more or less the time of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda) contains the name Akhish, king of Ekron (almost the same name as the king of Gat in the book of Samuel). It also lists his four ancestors and has a dedication to the goddess Patgaya, apparently the main deity of the Philistines, perhaps connected to the deity Dagon (I Sam. 5). = AM