

IS THE PHILISTINE PARADIGM STILL VIABLE?

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The Philistine Paradigm has dominated archaeological and historical research since the work of R.A.S. Macalister a century ago (MACALISTER 1914), and to an even greater degree since it was formulated in a more detailed way by W.F. ALBRIGHT (1932:58) and A. ALT (1944) a few decades later. According to this model – which was based on an interpretation of ancient Near Eastern records, the biblical text and archaeological finds in Philistia – large numbers of Philistines invaded Canaan by land and sea, and Ramesses III blocked their onslaught and resettled them in Egyptian strongholds in the southern Coastal Plain. When Egypt retreated from Canaan the Philistines took over these territories and established a powerful system of five cities – the biblical “Pentapolis” (for the current presentation of the Philistine Paradigm see, e.g., DOTHAN and DOTHAN 1992; BIETAK 1993; STAGER 1995; DOTHAN 1998).

Recent studies and accumulation of new data on old excavations call for a reexamination of the world of Philistia and the Philistines in the Iron I. In this overview I wish to relate, albeit briefly, to six issues that constitute the backbone of the Philistine Paradigm.

I. ADDITIONAL DATA PERTAINING TO THE DEBATE ON THE DATE OF THE PHILISTINE SETTLEMENT

An ever-growing amount of evidence demonstrates that the Egypto-Canaanite system of the Late Bronze Age continued to function at least until the days of Ramesses IV.

A scarab of Ramesses IV was identified by KRAUSS (1994) at Lachish. It was found near the tel, probably in a Level VI context. Since Lachish was not inhabited in the Iron I, there is no doubt that the scarab indeed originated from the city of Level VI. An additional scarab of Ramesses IV, found in the excavations of the 1930s, has recently been identified by Nir Lalkin, a Ph.D. student at Tel Aviv University (personal communication).

UEHLINGER (1988:13–15) dated two scarabs from

Cemetery 900 at Tell el-Farah (south) to the days of Ramesses IV and GOLDWASSER and WIMMER (1999) have recently assigned two hieratic fragments found at the site by Petrie to the days of Ramesses III. Cemetery 900 at Tell el-Farah did not produce Philistine pottery.

A reevaluation of the Ashdod finds (FINKELSTEIN and SINGER-AVITZ 2001) seems to indicate that the Late Bronze city there was not destroyed before the mid-12th century BCE. This observation is based on the ceramic finds from local Stratum 6 in Area H and on the scarabs of Ramesses III and Ramesses IV that were found (in unstratified contexts) at the site (BRANDL 1993:138–139; BEN-SHLOMO 2003:89 respectively). It seems, therefore, that general Stratum XIV at Ashdod (local H6) was a contemporary of Level VI at Lachish (BEN-SHLOMO [2003] rejected our observations; for our reply to his rejoinder see FINKELSTEIN and SINGER-AVITZ, 2004).

Stratum XIV at Gezer “was rather thoroughly destroyed” (DEVER *et al.* 1974: 51). Its limited pottery assemblage is typical of the latest phase of the Late Bronze Age. A relatively large quantity of unstratified Egyptian artifacts of the late 19th and 20th Dynasties was found at the site, mainly in the course of the old Macalister excavations (for details see SINGER 1986–87). They include a scarab of Ramesses IV and a cartouche of Ramesses IX. SINGER (*ibid.*) rightly suggested that these finds should probably be assigned to Stratum XIV, the last Late Bronze city at Gezer.

At nearby Aphek, a Ramesses IV scarab was found in a Stratum X10 pit (KOCHAVI 1981:81; KEEL 1997: 85, no. 17), which also yielded bichrome Philistine pottery. It is clear, therefore, that the scarab must have originated from an earlier stratum. Of the two possibilities – the residency of Stratum XII and the post-residency-pre-Philistine Stratum XI – I tend to prefer the former. But the much-debated date of the destruction of this stratum is beyond the scope of this paper.

Stratum IX at Tel Sera produced a hieratic

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inscription from the 22+x year of an Egyptian pharaoh – doubtless Ramesses III (GOLDWASSER 1984).

A late-Late Bronze tomb at Beth-Shemesh also produced a scarab of Ramesses IV (GRANT 1932 51:40; I am grateful to Nir Lalkin for referring me to this item).

Finally, various finds from Deir el-Balah, most of which were retrieved from the antiquity market, hint that the site continued to function in the time of the 20th Dynasty, possibly until the days of Ramesses VI (GIVEON 1977; FINKELSTEIN 1995:222–223).

In the northern part of Canaan, Megiddo could not have been destroyed before the days of Ramesses III. In fact, it was probably still occupied in the days of Ramesses VI (SINGER 1988–89; USSISHKIN 1995). A group of finds from Beth-Shean testify that the Egyptian stronghold there still functioned in the days of Ramesses IV (FINKELSTEIN 1996a).

The picture that emerges from all these sites – which cover the areas of Philistia, the Shephelah and the Jezreel Valley – is clear: The Egyptian administration in Canaan survived at least until the days of Ramesses IV, and possibly a bit later.

Needless to say, not a single locally made Mycenaean IIIC:1b (“Monochrome”) sherd – the pottery commonly affiliated with the early phase of the Philistine settlement – has ever been found in any of these strata, even at sites located only a few kilometers from the main Philistine centers. Moreover – and no less important – not a single Egyptian 20th Dynasty vessel (to differ from stray sherds) has ever been found in any of the Monochrome strata. These phenomena (for a full discussion see FINKELSTEIN 1995) are too widespread to be explained as coexistence between the two cultures – that is, that the Philistines took over part of Philistia while Egypt continued to control nearby sites (see recently DOTHAN 1998:159–160).

BUNIMOVITZ and FAUST (2001) have recently traveled far in search of ethnographic case studies from the Baringo district in Kenya, to show that two distinct cultures can coexist without mixing much of their material traits. They and other scholars (e.g., BIETAK 1993; DOTHAN 1998) argued that the early Philistines could have lived parallel to the Egyptian 20th Dynasty strongholds, with each community maintaining its distinctive culture in total isolation from the other.

The quantity and variety of contemporary human cultures enables ethnologists to find a parallel to each and every historical phenomenon. In fact, ethnography can supply examples to conflicting situ-

ations. The task of the archaeologist is to set the rules of comparison. There is no question, to my mind, that 20th century CE African tribes *cannot* be compared to the 12th century BCE Egyptian Empire in the Levant, or to the 12th century migrants from the Aegean basin. These phenomena are simply incomparable: The level of social and political organization, the environment, the contact with neighboring cultures – all are too different from each other. Bunimovitz and Faust’s comparisons are far beyond the legitimate limits of analogy (see details in FINKELSTEIN 2002a).

In any event, Ashdod and Tel Migne supplied evidence that the Monochrome phase postdated the Egyptian rule. In both sites the remains of the two cultures were found one on top of the other (Ashdod XIII and H-6, and Tel Migne VII and VIIIA). Therefore, the two parties – Egyptian and Philistine – are separated stratigraphically, that is, separated chronologically and not geographically. There are no clues regarding the settlement of the Sea Peoples, Philistines included, before the 1140s or 1130s BCE.

II. THE DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECT: WAS THERE A LARGE-SCALE PHILISTINE INVASION OF CANAAN?

The issue regarding the size of the Philistine migration is strongly debated. Beliefs range from a major invasion by sea of tens of thousands of people (e.g., STAGER 1995:344), to the assumption that about 10,000 people came, mainly by land (YASUR-LANDAU 2003a:368), through to a total rejection of such a migration (SHERRATT 1998).

The only way to deal with this issue quantitatively is to compare the two successive settlement systems in Philistia – in the Late Bronze and the Iron I. The data for such a comparison, which I presented a few years ago (FINKELSTEIN 1996b), needs to be updated and amended, mainly because I now tend to reduce the area of Iron I Ashkelon (below). The field data – from excavations and surveys alike – seem to indicate that the Late Bronze/Iron I transition featured both change and continuity. The main change was the total annihilation of the city-state of Lachish and its surrounding villages. Continuity is hinted by the reoccupation of some of the major and secondary sites and by the fact that only a few new settlements were established in the Iron I. As for numbers, the total built-up area diminished from ca. 175 hectares in the Late Bronze to ca. 135 hectares in the Iron I, with the latter number probably representing the peak of the period in its advanced stage. If we translate these numbers into population figures – and I do this only for the sake of

demonstration without claiming accuracy – we reach an estimate of about 35,000 people in the Late Bronze and 27,000 in the Iron I.

Attempting to evaluate the meaning of these numbers one should remember that: A) It is reasonable to assume that not all the Late Bronze population was annihilated; B) It seems likely that the transformation in Philistia was gradual and that the numbers for the Iron I represent a relatively later stage of this period, after the recovery from the crisis of the mid-12th century. From the demographic perspective these two points seem to balance each other. It is clear, therefore, that we are *not* dealing with a migration of more than a few thousand people.

III. WERE THE IRON I PHILISTINES A MARITIME POWER?

Many scholars – recent among them STAGER (1995) and BARAKO (2003) – have described the migration of the Sea Peoples as a large-scale maritime invasion. Yasur-Landau, on the other hand, has recently pointed out the immense difficulties in organizing a massive maritime migration from the Aegean world to the coast of Canaan in the late second millennium BCE, arguing that the archaeological finds from Philistia do not support a theory of a major maritime invasion. He therefore opted for a migration by land (YASUR-LANDAU 2003a; 2003b). Since this debate has – as far as I can judge – come to a stalemate, I wish to pose a slightly different question that *may* shed light on this issue: Were the Philistines, after their settlement, a maritime power?

The settlement pattern in Philistia seems to provide a negative answer. First, only one of the major Philistine centers – Ashkelon – is located on the coast. Ashdod and Gaza are wrongly described as coastal cities since a harbor to their west was needed in order to engage in maritime activity. This phenomenon – an inland city with a port-quarter on the coast – is not known in Philistia before the Assyrian takeover in the late-8th century BCE, when Ashdod Yam to the west of Ashdod and Blahiah to the west of Gaza were founded (FINKELSTEIN and SINGER-AVITZ 2001:246–253; HUMBERT and ABU HASSUNEH 1999 respectively).

Moreover, the settlement patterns of the southern Coastal Plain show that there were more coastal sites in the Late Bronze (11) than in the Iron I (only 6). And of the 10 settlements established in the Iron I, only 3 were built on the coast or in its immediate vicinity (FINKELSTEIN 1996b).

Therefore, there is no clear-cut link between the Iron I settlement system in Philistia and the coast.

IV. WERE THE IRON I PHILISTINE CITIES FORTIFIED?

Most scholars agree that, apart from reuse of the old Middle Bronze ramparts, the Late Bronze city-states were unfortified. And based on the results of the excavations at Tel Mique, Ashdod and Ashkelon, scholars have argued that the Philistines built large-scale fortifications in an early stage of their settlement (DOTHAN and GITIN 1993; DOTHAN and PORATH 1993:69–72; STAGER 1995:342 respectively).

USSISHKIN (2005) has recently scrutinized the data from Tel Mique. He has convincingly shown that Ekron was not fortified in the Iron I; that massive fortifications surrounded it only in the late 8th century BCE, probably after it was taken by Sargon II; and that it subsequently grew to function as one of the most important Assyrian-related centers in the west. I accept these arguments.

SINGER-AVITZ and I have recently reexamined the Ashdod remains (in Area G) which were interpreted by DOTHAN and PORATH (1993:69–72) as belonging to a fortification system dated to the Iron I. To the best of our understanding, the Stratum XII remains do not belong to a fortification system. The “glacis” is nothing but a fill and the parallel walls that were described as a section of a casemate fortification probably belong to a large building that functioned in Strata XIV–XI. And as far as SINGER-AVITZ and I can judge, the massive city wall assigned to Stratum X was built later in the history of Iron II Ashdod, probably in the 8th century BCE (FINKELSTEIN and SINGER-AVITZ 2001).

The full results of the excavations at Ashkelon have not yet been published and one needs, therefore, to turn to Stager’s general description of the finds. Remains of a massive mudbrick tower were found on the crest of the huge Middle Bronze earthen rampart, on the northern edge of the site. The ancient earthwork was renovated by a “huge glacis-type rampart.” STAGER (1991:7) dated the construction of these fortifications to ca. 1150 BCE. A few years later he described these remains in a somewhat different way, reporting that Monochrome Philistine pottery was found in fills sealed by the earliest Philistine rampart; here STAGER (1995:342) dated the construction of the rampart to the early Iron II. Since we are dealing with the crest of the rampart, it is clear that no floors were found and that the dating of the remains is indeed based on pottery from fills. This general observation and the early Iron II date given by Stager (probably meaning that early Iron II pottery was found in the fills together with the Monochrome sherds), lead to three conclusions: A) The Iron I material comes from fills; B) The towers were

built in the Iron II, possibly even in an advanced stage of the period; C) No evidence for Iron I fortifications has thus far been found at Ashkelon. It is possible, of course, that future excavations will uncover such evidence in el-Hadra – the inner, relatively small tel of Ashkelon – though the excavations of Grid 38 on its northern edge have not, for the time being, unearthed such remains.

To sum-up this issue, no evidence for Iron I fortifications has thus far been found in Philistia. The opposite is true: The long period of time between the Middle Bronze and the Iron II is characterized by unfortified cities. The great fortifications of Tel Mique, Ashdod and Ashkelon were probably built in the 8th century BCE, in relation to the growing Assyrian involvement in Palestine.

V. DID THE PHILISTINE CITIES CONSTITUTE A SYSTEM OF FIVE PEER-POLITIES?

In order to answer this question I must broaden the discussion to include the development in Philistia in the Iron II.

Iron I Ekron stretched across the entire mound – the upper and lower tels alike – an area of ca. 20 hectares. It seems the site was destroyed in the late 10th century BCE (Low Chronology; early 10th century BCE according to DOTHAN and GITIN, e.g., 1993:1056). When the city revived, it shrank to the upper mound. In the late 8th century BCE, Ekron again expanded across the entire mound, reached its peak prosperity and was surrounded by massive fortifications (USSISHKIN 2005). By the 7th century it had become the most important city in Philistia (GITIN 1995).

Iron I Ashdod stretched across the upper mound only – an area of 7 hectares. In the early Iron II (the 9th century BCE), Ashdod began a gradual expansion to the lower mound. It reached its peak prosperity and maximal size – about 35 hectares – in the 8th century BCE (FINKELSTEIN and SINGER-AVITZ 2001). At that time it was surrounded by massive fortifications, including the four-entry gate in the east (for its date in the 8th century BCE see USSISHKIN 1990:77–82). In 711 BCE, Ashdod was conquered by Sargon II and never recovered from the shock. It is possible that a small settlement existed there in the early 7th century, but it seems that following the Assyrian conquest the main settlement was relocated to the coastal Ashdod Yam, which served the Assyrian trade policies better than the inland site (FINKELSTEIN and SINGER-AVITZ 2001).

STAGER (1995:342–343) suggested that Iron I Ashkelon covered the entire area of the immense Middle Bronze enclosure – about 60 hectares. This

assumption is based on evidence from fills containing (Iron I) Philistine sherds found on top of the northern rampart. Yet, pottery from fills – especially pottery found in an earthwork belonging to a fortification system – does not necessarily testify to the existence of a settlement (from the time of these sherds) at that spot. In other words, when the Ashkelon rampart was renovated, probably some time in the Iron II, the builders could have used settlement refuse-material from other parts of the site. Stratified remains from the Iron I were found only in the inner mound (el-Hadra) which covers an area of 6.5 hectares (also YASUR-LANDAU 2003a:358). It seems that Ashkelon grew in size – to include at least parts of the Middle Bronze enclosure – in the Iron II.

We know nothing about the size of Gaza in the different phases of the Iron Age. As for Gath, the excavations – old and new – have not supplied clear data for a reliable reconstruction of the development of the Iron Age city. But in this case the written sources add valuable information. We do not know the size of Iron I Gath, but it seems that the city reached its peak prosperity in the 9th century BCE. MAEIR (2001:113) has estimated that the city of that time stretched over an area of 35 or even 40 hectares – the largest city in Philistia, if not in the entire country. This city was destroyed in a conflagration in the late 9th century BCE, probably brought on by Hazael, King of Damascus (II Kings 12: 18, which is usually considered a reliable source). Gath never recovered from this blow. When Sargon II campaigned in Philistia, it was already a secondary town in the territory of Ashdod. Nor does it appear in the 7th century sources (for Gath in the historical sources see SCHNIEDEWIND 1998).

Another matter that should be checked is the settlement hinterland of the Philistine cities. One can expect that a peer-polity organization would be characterized by a somewhat equal, hierarchic settlement system around the major cities. This is not the case in Iron I Philistia (see FINKELSTEIN 1996b). Ashdod had only a sparsely settled hinterland and Ashkelon had no rural hinterland at all. Gath is located on the northern edge of its possible territory, with most of the small sites located far to its south. Only Ekron and Gaza had a reasonably intensive rural hinterland. This is not surprising, as Ekron seems to have been the major Philistine city in the Iron I.

It seems to me, then, that the answer to the question of a peer-polity system in the Iron I should be negative. First, Iron I Philistia features urban centers of different size, density of settlement in the hinterland and thus political power. Second, and more

important, it seems that the center of gravity in Philistia *shifted* in the course of the Iron Age from one place to another: In the Iron I Ekron was a central, important settlement, possibly the largest in Philistia. Its destruction in the late 10th century BCE opened the way for the rise of Gath, which reached its peak in the mid-9th century. And when Gath was destroyed by Hazael, Ashdod came to the fore. Ashdod was the largest and most prosperous city in Philistia in the 8th century BCE. When it was thoroughly destroyed in 711 BCE, Ekron rose again. In the 7th century BCE it was probably the largest and most important city in Philistia.

VI. CAN THE IRON I PHILISTINES BE EQUATED WITH THE BIBLICAL PHILISTINES?

Scholars have tended to read the “early” biblical description of the Philistines on an Iron I background (e.g., SINGER 1994; NOORT 1994; EHRLICH 1996; MACHINIST 2000). This idea rested on the theory of a great Solomonic enlightenment period, with strong scribal activity that produced texts describing the realities of the time (ROST 1982 [in German 1926]). Yet, over a century of archaeological activity in Judah has not produced even a single trace of widespread scribal activity before the late 8th century BCE.

Indeed, it is quite clear that the Iron I Philistines and the biblical Philistines are two worlds apart. Other Sea Peoples, such as the *Sikila* and the *Sherdani* – are not mentioned in the Bible, and the text is unaware of any component of the Iron I Philistine material culture. On the other hand, the biblical Philistines perfectly fit the realities of the late Iron II. Following are a few examples in brief (for the full arguments see FINKELSTEIN 2002b).

One of the best and most well-known examples is the case of Achish. The Assyrian texts and the Ekron Inscription both speak about a 7th century Ikausu, who was probably the figure around whom the story of Achish, King of Gath in the days of David, was formed (Naveh 1998).

In several cases the biblical text mentions five *seranim*, and in one place (Josh 13:3) it specifically refers to a Philistine Pentapolis. The term *seren*, which lacks Semitic etymology, has usually been connected with Greek *tyrannos*, which appears for the first time in the 7th century. PINTORE (1983) compared the word *tyrannos* – probably of Lydian origin – to the Luwian *tarwanis*, a title given to neo-Hittite governors. He saw the chain of influence as *tarwanis* > *tyrannos* > *seren*, but faced a problem: The biblical *seren* was dated to the Iron I – before the

first appearance of the other two terms. Dating *seren* in the 7th century resolves the problem: *tyrannos* developed in the 7th century or earlier in western Anatolia from *tarwanis* and *seren* appears about the same time in the biblical text. It was probably transferred to Philistia by Lydian, Carian and Ionian mercenaries who served in the army of Psammetichus I, and who must have been deployed, among other places, in Philistia (for details see FINKELSTEIN 2002b). The biblical notion of a confederation of five cities may also reflect 7th century Greek and Western Asia Minor realities of leagues of cities, which first appeared in the Archaic period (e.g., JEFFERY 1976).

The armor of Goliath was sometimes interpreted as reflecting the look of Early Iron Age Aegean warriors, and compared to the figures on the Warrior Vase from Mycenae (YADIN 1963:354; STAGER 1991:17; DOTHAN and DOTHAN 1992:47). Yet, the warriors on the vase are protected by non-metallic armor and the weapons of the Sea Peoples in the Medinat Habu reliefs are completely different from those used by Goliath. In fact, the best comparison of Goliath's armor is to the armor of Greek hoplites of the 7th-to-5th centuries BCE. The Judahite authors probably knew Greek hoplites who served – in their own days – in the Egyptian army of Psammetichus I.

These are but a few of many examples. But they are sufficient to stress my point: The biblical Philistines are completely devoid of Iron I background. On the other hand, they are thoroughly imbued with 7th century realities.

SUMMARY

Was there a Sea Peoples migration to the coast of the Levant? Yes. Was it a maritime migration? Possibly. Was there a massive maritime Sea Peoples invasion? Probably not. Did the Philistines settle en-mass in Philistia in the days of Ramesses III? No. Were the Iron I Philistine cities fortified? No. Were the Iron I Philistines organized in a peer-polity system? Probably not. Was there a Philistine Pentapolis system in the Iron I? No. Are the Iron I Philistines the Philistines described in the Bible? No.

If only some of the above answers are valid, they mark the end of the Philistine Paradigm, which is based – directly or indirectly – on uncritical reading of the biblical text, and which has dominated research in the last century. But what *can* we say?

In the 1140s or 1130s BCE, Egyptian domination in Canaan collapsed and many of the cities there were devastated, or partially destroyed, probably by

groups of Sea Peoples and other, local, unstable elements. Many of the main cities recovered after a while and were resettled by a mixed population of local Canaanites and Aegean immigrants. The share of the new settlers in the population of Philistia was limited – probably a few thousands. But constituting an elite group, their material culture developed to dominate the scene. The Iron I cities in Philistia did not conduct a lively maritime trade; they were not

equal in size, power and prosperity and they were not fortified. Dramatic changes in the size and power of these cities can be traced from the 9th century and mainly in the 8th century BCE. Philistia reached its peak power and prosperity only with the Assyrian conquest and the transformation of its cities into agents of Assyrian economic and political interests. Then, and only then, do the Philistines of archaeology become the Philistines of the Bible.

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