

LACHISH AND THE DATE OF THE PHILISTINE SETTLEMENT IN CANAAN

David Ussishkin

More than twenty years have passed since I first suggested (USSISHKIN 1983:170; 1985:222–223), based on the data uncovered in the excavation of Tel Lachish, that the destruction date of Canaanite Lachish in the latter part of the 12th century BCE forms a *terminus post quem* for dating the settlement of the Philistines and the appearance of their characteristic pottery in the Coastal Plain. Several additional data in support of this conclusion have been added in the last twenty years, and it is time to discuss the issue afresh. The new information at our disposal includes the following six items:

1. Two scarabs from Lachish were identified as belonging to the reign of Ramesses IV. Hence Level VI could not have been destroyed before the reign of Ramesses IV.
2. A newly-found hieratic inscription apparently indicates that hieratic inscriptions were written in Lachish by a professional scribe.
3. The extensive study of the pottery from the renewed excavations at Lachish which has been carried out during the last decade as part of the preparations for the publication of the final excavation report (USSISHKIN (ed.) 2004) did not reveal even a single Philistine sherd, either Monochrome or Bichrome.
4. The analysis of the finds from the excavations at Lachish carried out in the last decade indicated that Lachish maintained strong commercial connections with the Coastal Plain and the Mediterranean Coast during Level VI. Of particular interest are Cedar of Lebanon beams, *Glycymeris* shells, and fresh marine and Nile River fish imported to Lachish.
5. Systematic excavations have been started in Tel Zafit, the site of ancient Gath, situated 15 km. from Lachish. Both Monochrome and Bichrome Philistine pottery was discovered there.
6. The survey of the Lachish region and other surveys, and the analysis of the data, showed that all the settlements in the Lachish region were destroyed and abandoned at the end of the Late Bronze Age while the later Iron Age settlement pattern is radically different.

Below, I shall summarize all the presently available evidence, including the new data listed above, and then discuss in brief its implication for dating the Philistine settlement and the appearance of Philistine pottery in the Coastal Plain.

THE EVIDENCE FROM LACHISH: LEVEL VI AND THE EGYPTIAN HEGEMONY

During the 13th and 12th centuries BCE Lachish enjoyed a period of great prosperity under the aegis of Egypt's hegemony in southern Canaan. The city-state of Lachish dominated the surrounding region, though its size and borders can only be surmised. According to Finkelstein's estimates (FINKELSTEIN 1996; 2000:166–173) the territory of Lachish comprised 990 km.² and included 25 sites which covered 30 hectares or more. Based on a coefficient of 200 persons per inhabited hectare, the territory of Lachish would have been home to some 6000 people. The city itself – which was not protected by a city-wall or any other fortifications – covered the entire area of the summit (ca. 20 acres) as well as the western and southern slopes down to the area at the base of the mound. It appears that Lachish was one of the largest and most prosperous Canaanite cities in the land during this period.

Based on the results of the renewed excavations, two strata have been discerned here: The earlier stratum, Level VII, included Fosse Temple III. This stratum was destroyed by fire, probably at the end of the 13th century BCE. The city was rebuilt in Level VI – but not the Fosse Temple which remained in ruins. The Level VI city – the last Canaanite city – came to a violent end when the settlement was totally destroyed and its population exiled and/or liquidated in ca. 1140–1130 BCE as detailed below.

The city of Level VI – which interests us here – prospered and developed under the Egyptian hegemony of southern Canaan during the time of the 20th Dynasty. The exact nature of Egypt's dominance, and the role it played in the government of the country have been variously interpreted (see OREN 1985a; SINGER 1988; HIGGINBOTHAM 2000). Undoubtedly, the city-state of Lachish flourished under the aegis of the Egyptian pharaoh, and some

scholars believe that it was ruled directly by the Egyptians (SINGER 1988:5).

The finds from Lachish which help to elucidate the nature of the Egyptian hegemony include a number of inscriptions in hieratic script, mostly found in the constructional fills of the Judean palace-fort and apparently originating from the Level VI acropolis (see recent summary in SWEENEY 2004). The most important inscription is written on a Level VI type bowl and dates to the reign of Ramesses III (GOLDWASSER 1982). These hieratic inscriptions, as shown by Goldwasser in conjunction with her study on the hieratic bowls from Tel Sera^c (GOLDWASSER 1984), constitute the documentation of the *šmw* (harvest tax) paid to an Egyptian religious institution probably associated with a local temple. According to Goldwasser, the recording of the harvest tax on votive bowls reflects the economic exploitation of southern Canaan by the Egyptian authorities via the religious establishment. This may mean that Canaanite Lachish, together with southern Canaan, was under Egyptian suzerainty at the time. One inscription identifies the writer as a scribe who might have had a non-Egyptian name (GOLDWASSER 1991), and Sweeney suggests that he may have been a Canaanite or a Syrian who received an Egyptian education and became a competent writer of hieratic. This scribe probably lived and worked at Lachish.

Another important find is the cast bronze plaque bearing a cartouche of Ramesses III found in the city-gate area in a Level VI context (USSISHKIN 2004; GIVEON, SWEENEY and LALKIN 2004). Giveon has raised the possibility that it may have been part of the city-gate door.

Two anthropoid clay coffins were uncovered by the British expedition in Tomb 570 (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:131–132, 248–249, pls. 45–46). As generally agreed (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:131; DOTHAN 1982: 276–279; YANNAI 2004) the pottery assemblage of Tomb 570 postdates Fosse Temple III and is contemporary with Level VI. One of the coffins bears a hieroglyphic inscription. According to M.A. Murray, A. Rowe and A. Gardiner, “the inscription is very curious, and ... the writing is not that of an Egyptian scribe” (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:132). The clay of one coffin was analyzed by Neutron Activation Analysis, suggesting that the coffin was made in the Lachish area, though “final proof will demand a more thorough sampling from this area” (PERLMAN, ASARO and DOTHAN 1973:149–150). Thus, it seems that two officials probably of foreign origin and attached to the Egyptian administrative centre (see below) were buried in the coffins.

Finally, the Egyptian character of the Level VI temple, and probably that of the royal acropolis, should be emphasized. Strong Egyptian influence is seen in various structural, architectural and ornamental elements in the acropolis temple, as well as in many of the objects found within it. As the Level VI temple probably formed part of the royal acropolis, one might hypothesize that similar Egyptian influence might have been present in the royal palace complex as well. The above-discussed hieratic inscriptions may suggest the existence of an Egyptian administrative centre. (Here may have been the ‘offices’ of the above-mentioned scribe and the officials buried in the clay coffins.) Singer has suggested that an Egyptian “government residency” existed on the acropolis at the time (SINGER 1988:5). A large brick-built silo in Egyptian style whose remains were found in the renewed excavations might have been part of the complex.

The period of Levels VII and VI is marked by trade and cultural connections with other countries as well as the cities in the Coastal Plain. These commercial connections are manifested at Lachish by pottery and other objects from Egypt, north-western Anatolia, Mycenae, Crete, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, north-western Arabia as well as the Coastal Plain. It was channelled primarily through the Canaanite ports along the Mediterranean coast, Ashkelon, situated ca. 30 km. from Lachish, foremost among them. We shall briefly discuss below only three aspects which portray the nature of the strong connections with the Coastal Plain during Level VI.

First, cedar of Lebanon beams were lavishly used as structural members in the Level VI acropolis temple, primarily as wooden beams spanning the roof of the main hall (LIPHSCHITZ 2004). This tree is found today in Turkey, Cyprus, Syria and Lebanon (LIPHSCHITZ and BIGER 1991:167), and it may be assumed that the Lachish beams were imported from regions of Syria or Lebanon near the Mediterranean Coast. Cedar trunks may reach a height of nearly 40 m., but those brought to Lachish were probably much smaller. Nonetheless, it must have been a difficult task to transport these trunks to the Lebanese coast, to ship them by sea to the coast of Canaan, and then to haul them to inland Lachish.

Second, a great number of mollusc shells were brought from the Mediterranean beach (BAR-YOSEF MAYER 2004). About 4180 shells of the common type *Glycymeris violacescens* were counted in Late Bronze loci, and about 720 of them were found in clear Level VI contexts. These shells were apparently used in construction of floors and in preparation of plaster.

Thirdly, a considerable number of fresh Mediterranean and Nile River fish were imported to Lachish and consumed by the inhabitants (LERNAU and GOLANI 2004) during the Late Bronze period, and the discovery of fish bones in Level VI contexts indicates that this practice continued in Level VI. The marine fish included sea breams, drums, sea basses, sharks and rays and grey mullets. Of particular interest are the many bones of Nile perch from the Nile Delta imported via Ashkelon or other ports. Significantly, bones of larger Nile perch were found in the Level VI temple than were found in contemporary domestic contexts.

THE EVIDENCE FROM LACHISH: THE DESTRUCTION OF LEVEL VI

Level VI – the last Canaanite city – was razed to the ground in a violent, fiery destruction, traces of which were detected at every point in which remains of Level VI were uncovered. Significantly, no remains of battle were found, apart from a single bronze arrow-head. The destruction was complete, the population apparently liquidated or driven out, since Tel Lachish was abandoned following the catastrophe and remained desolate for a long period of time. As can be gathered from the regional survey (DAGAN 2004) the Late Bronze Age settlements in the surrounding region were also destroyed and abandoned.

The date of the destruction can be fixed with much accuracy. A scarab of Ramesses III found in the constructional fills of the Iron Age palace-fort by the British expedition suggested to Tufnell that Canaanite Lachish did not come to an end before the reign of Ramesses III (TUFNELL, INGE and HARDING 1940:23; TUFNELL 1953:51–52; TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:37). Tufnell's suggestion was confirmed during the renewed excavations when a cast bronze object bearing a cartouche of Ramesses III was found, as related above, in a Level VI context in the city-gate area (USSISHKIN 2004; GIVEON, SWEENEY and LALKIN 2004).

In 1994 Krauss discovered that a scarab uncovered in the British excavations bears the name of Ramesses IV (KRAUSS 1994), a reading seconded by Othmar Keel (*ibid.*:126). The scarab (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:126, pls. 39:380; 40:380) was uncovered in a locus defined as “part of a wall”, with some late Late Bronze pottery and other scarabs, ca. 100 m. to the south of the mound (TUFNELL 1953: pls. 108, 130; TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:306). Recently, Lalkin identified another scarab uncovered in the British excavations as dating to the reign of Ramesses IV (LALKIN 2004). This scarab (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958: pl. 39:372) was

found near the south-western corner of the site, not far from the place where the previous scarab was uncovered. It was found near disturbed Tomb 570, which contained the above-mentioned anthropoid coffins as well as an assemblage of pottery assigned on typological grounds to the very end of Canaanite Lachish (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:67, 240–241, 248–250; DOTAN 1982:276–279). It appears that the scarab in question was originally placed in this tomb and therefore it is contemporary with the coffins and the pottery assemblage.

In conclusion, we can safely assume that both scarabs stem from Level VI, especially in light of the fact that the site was abandoned for some two centuries or more following the destruction of Level VI. Ramesses IV reigned between 1151–1145 BCE (low chronology, after WENTE and VAN SICKLE 1976:218, Table I), a date which serves as a likely *terminus post quem* for the destruction of Level VI.

The evidence points to the devastation of Level VI by a strong and resolute enemy, but the silent archaeological evidence provided no direct clue as to the nature and identity of that enemy or to the immediate circumstances surrounding the city's downfall. Suggestions regarding these problems remain speculation at present. At the time I favoured the idea, first raised by Albright (ALBRIGHT 1935:13–14), that Level VI was conquered and destroyed by the Israelite tribes as related in Joshua 10:31–32 (USSISHKIN 1978:92). However, the suggestion that Level VI was destroyed by the Sea Peoples is clearly more attractive and has to be adopted. This idea was first considered by Tufnell (TUFNELL, INGE and HARDING 1940:24; TUFNELL 1953:52). The razing of the Level VI city and the subsequent abandonment of the site could be compared to the fate of Ugarit and Alalakh, the final Late Bronze Age destructions of which are attributed to the invading Sea Peoples. The founding of large Philistine centres at nearby Gath and Ekron, the diffusion of Philistine pottery in the region and the complete change in the settlement pattern in Iron I (FINKELSTEIN 1996: figs. 1–2; 2000:166–173; DAGAN 2004) could then be easily explained. Thus, despite the absence of direct evidence, it seems probable that Lachish Level VI was destroyed and its population liquidated and/or exiled by the Sea Peoples who immigrated to and settled in the Coastal Plain.

Finally, it can be assumed that the Philistine conquest of the southern Coastal Plain was a prime factor in the collapse of Egyptian authority over southern Canaan (FINKELSTEIN 1995), a loss of control that left Lachish, as well as other unfortified centres,

in particular Megiddo (USSISHKIN 1995:258–265), completely vulnerable. It thus appears that the collapse of Egyptian hegemony occurred concurrently with the destruction of Canaanite Lachish. The direct evidence from Lachish, as discussed above, indicates that Lachish still existed during the reign of Ramesses IV (1151–1145 BCE). Uehlinger has suggested, based on Egyptian finds from southern Canaan, that the Egyptians withdrew from the region during this period (UEHLINGER 1988:20–25; also NA'AMAN 2000:4).

However, the statue base of Ramesses VI uncovered at Megiddo (BREASTED in: LOUD 1948:135–138), which should probably be assigned to Stratum VIIA (e.g., MAZAR 1985:97; SINGER 1988–1989:107; USSISHKIN 1995:259–260), seems to indicate that Egyptian hegemony reached as far north as Megiddo as late as the reign of Ramesses VI (1141–1134 BCE; low chronology, after WENTE and VAN SICLEN 1976:218, table I). It is hard to believe that the Egyptians could have held Megiddo without concurrently holding southern Canaan, including the coastal highway leading to Megiddo. Hence, one may hypothesize that the end of Egyptian hegemony in Canaan and the destruction of Lachish Level VI occurred not before ca. 1130 BCE (Also FINKELSTEIN 2000:161–162).

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DATE OF THE PHILISTINE SETTLEMENT

No Philistine painted pottery – Monochrome pottery (labelled by T. Dothan and others “locally made Mycenaean IIIC:1b pottery”) as well as Bichrome pottery – was found in Lachish in the large-scale excavations conducted by three successive expeditions, with the sole exception of a few sherds from the potter’s workshop in Cave 4034 discovered by the British expedition: “These pieces belonged to jugs or flasks, but there were also two bowl fragments without a lime wash, painted in black and red” (TUFNELL *et al.* 1958:293). The potter’s workshop was in use during Level VI, but the presence of a number of red-slipped and burnished Iron Age sherds shows that the cave was not abandoned following the destruction of this level. Hence, the Philistine sherds could either have belonged to Level VI or, more likely, constitute a later intrusion, perhaps left in the cave, located on the slope of the mound not far from its main water source, by someone seeking shelter. The crucial fact is that for all practical purposes Philistine pottery is altogether missing at Tel Lachish.

This fact has far reaching implications. Tel

Lachish is not too distant from the coastal region that was the distribution centre of Philistine pottery. Two major Philistine cities, Tel Zafit (Tell es-Safi), identified with ancient Gath, and Tel Migne, identified with ancient Ekron, are situated 15 and 23 km., respectively, to the north of Lachish. Standing on the summit of Tel Lachish one can see clearly Tel Zafit, and the hillocks surrounding Tel Lachish can be seen from the summit of Tel Zafit. Large amounts of Monochrome and Bichrome Philistine pottery were uncovered at Tel Migne, which was at that time a large Philistine settlement (e.g., DOTHAN 2000; DOTHAN and ZUCKERMAN 2004). The recent excavations at Tel Zafit also uncovered Monochrome and Bichrome Philistine pottery (MAEIR 2003:242). Bichrome pottery has been found at sites even further inland than Tel Lachish, e.g., at Tel Beth-Shemesh, Tel ^cEton and Tell Beit Mirsim.

Considering the geographical position, size, trade connections and prosperity of Lachish Level VI as detailed above, it is difficult to imagine that prosperous, central Philistine cities could have coexisted with nearby Lachish at a time when Philistine pottery was being diffused inland from the coastal region without an appreciable quantity of it reaching Lachish. Can it be imagined that supplies of fresh marine fish and large Nile River fish were regularly brought from the coast of Ashkelon to Lachish as related above but not a single Philistine vessel found its way there? The only logical conclusion is that the absence of this distinctive pottery in Level VI shows that Lachish was simply not settled at the time that Monochrome and Bichrome pottery was being produced. The evidence from Lachish is negative; however, it is so absolutely negative that it constitutes a sound argument for dating the appearance of Philistine Monochrome and Bichrome pottery anywhere in the country to after the destruction of Level VI in ca. 1130 BCE. In other words, the destruction date of Level VI serves as a *terminus post quem* for dating the appearance of Philistine pottery in the land of Canaan.

This chronological conclusion which was briefly published at the time of the excavation (USSISHKIN 1983:170; 1985:222–223), has since come to form one of the cornerstones of Finkelstein’s revised Iron Age chronology (Finkelstein 1995; 2000), and has gained the support of a number of other scholars (e.g., OREN 1985a; 1985b; YANNAI 2004; NA'AMAN 2000:4).

Nonetheless, most scholars continue to hold that the city of Lachish Level VI could have coexisted with the great Philistine centres without some pottery diffusion taking place. T. Dothan has suggested

that the Philistines settled in the Coastal Plain in more than one wave, the first immigration wave formed by the users of the Monochrome pottery at the very beginning of the 12th century, and the second immigration wave formed by users of Bichrome pottery during the reign of Ramesses III (DOTHAN 2000:145, 156).

Most scholars, however, adopt the concept first proposed by Mazar and Singer in 1985 (MAZAR 1985; 1997:157–159; SINGER 1985; see also e.g., STAGER 1995:334–336; BUNIMOVITZ and FAUST 2001; MAEIR 2003). They believe that the process of settlement of the Philistines took place in two stages. During the initial stage, characterized by the appearance of Monochrome pottery and dated to the reign of Ramesses III, Philistine settlement and influence were limited to the Coastal Plain, to the region of the Pentapolis. Hence the diffusion of Monochrome pottery is limited to the region of the Coastal Plain. During the second stage, characterized by Bichrome pottery and dated to after the collapse of the Egyptian hegemony in southern Canaan, Philistine influence spread inland beyond the Coastal Plain. Hence Bichrome pottery is found in many places inland.

From this view it follows that the Monochrome pottery would have been contemporary with Lachish Level VI, while the Bichrome pottery would have been later in date. However, as discussed above, the negative evidence from Lachish is so absolutely negative that it constitutes a sound argument for dating the appearance of Philistine Monochrome as well as Bichrome pottery anywhere in the country to after the destruction of Level VI in ca. 1130 BCE.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In my view all the above data are conclusive, indicating how unlikely the commonly accepted concept of dating is. My argumentation can be summarized in three questions, asked in challenge of the “Mazar-Singer-Stager concept”, defined by Bunimovitz and Faust as the “cultural segregation concept”: First, how could the Egyptians have maintained their hegemony in Lachish and other parts of southern Canaan, including Megiddo and Beth-Shan, if they lost control of the Coastal Plain and the southern parts of the Via Maris which were invaded and occupied at that time by the Sea Peoples? Second, how is it possible that thriving cities such as Canaanite Lachish and Philistine Gath prospered at such geographical proximity to one another without a single piece of Philistine pottery imported to Lachish from Gath? Thirdly, how is it possible that extensive trade existed between Lachish and the Coastal Plain as well as the Mediterranean ports, including the importation of fresh marine fish, without even a single Philistine piece of pottery being imported to Lachish?

In summary, the dating of the Monochrome as well as the Bichrome Philistine pottery, and therefore the dating of the Philistine settlement in the Coastal Plain, to after ca. 1130 BCE, seems to be established on the basis of the evidence from Lachish. It appears that the settlement of the Philistines in the Coastal Plain followed the collapse of the Egyptian hegemony of the 20th Dynasty in southern Canaan, and the destruction of the Lachish Level VI Canaanite city which prospered under the aegis of Egypt’s hegemony.

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