New Insights into the Philistines in Light of Excavations at Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath

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Even though the arrival of the Philistines in the southern Levant is an event that happens “off camera,” that is, before the appearance of their settlement remains, it is an event that was narrativized in the recent past by archaeologists working in Philistia who interpreted the local production of Aegean style pottery as evidence of a massive colonization by Mycenaean migrants (Hitchcock and Maeir 2016a). By and large, the understanding of the Philistines and their culture was centered around the biblical images of the Philistines, and their continued reception and interpretation until modern times.

Accordingly, the Philistines were seen as a foreign conquering ethnic group, of apparently Aegean origin, who overpowered the existing polities and cultures in the southern coastal plain in the early Iron Age, and remained the dominant culture until the beginning of the Iron Age II. This was supposedly supported by the archaeological evidence, and by an explicit research narrative that developed out of it. This narrative—that Philistia and other areas producing their own Mycenaean-style pottery, was founded as an outcome of colonization by Mycenaean elites—has shaped and continues to shape our understanding of them. However, excavations at Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath and other Philistine

sites privileged finds with Aegean connections (some tenuous as we shall see), ignoring the significance of other categories of evidence with links to Canaan, Cyprus, Anatolia, and possibly even Italy in terms of spreading a warrior aesthetic prior to the end of the Bronze Age.¹ Seeing these other categories of evidence—as exemplified by tabuns, which are traditionally Canaanite but are also found in the Aegean (fig. 1; Gur-Arieh et al. 2014; Maeir and Hitchcock 2011); notched scapulae, which are associated with divination practices on Cyprus (fig. 2; Zukerman et al. 2007; Webb 1985); Lydian names and terms rendered in the Canaanite script (fig. 3; Giusfredi 2009; Maeir, Davis, and Hitchcock 2016); and the absence of other features connected with the Aegean world, such as monumental ashlar structures with decorative use of conglomerate (fig. 4; Hitchcock, Chapin et al. 2016)—led us to question this narrative. But if the Philistine connection to the Aegean world was not solely one of colonizing migrants, then what was it? Similarly, our work at Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath, with new finds and new interpretive directions, in conjunction with finds and discussions relating to other Philistine and related sites, has enabled us to suggest fresh, and at times controversial, suggestions regarding who the Philistines were, how we define their culture, and how they related to their surroundings. In the following pages, some of these insights will be presented.

Figure 1. Shira Gur-Arieh excavating a tabun. Locus 132029, Stratum A7 (Late Bronze Age: late thirteenth–early twelfth century B.C.E.), Area A, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath. Photograph by Louise A. Hitchcock.

Figure 2. Notched animal scapulae. Stratum A3 (Iron IIA: mid–late ninth century B.C.E.), Area A, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath. Photograph courtesy of the Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

Figure 3. Ostracon. Stratum A3 (Iron IIA: mid–late ninth century B.C.E.), Area A, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath. Photograph courtesy of Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

A Pirate's Life for Me?

In a series of articles (Hitchcock and Maeir 2014, 2016b, 2018, forthcoming; Maeir and Hitchcock 2017a, 2017b) the authors focused in on casual references in the archaeological literature to the “Sea Peoples” as pirates or raiders based on Egyptian accounts, on Hittite texts on the Lukka and Ahhiyawa, on

depictions of possible naval engagement on Mycenaean IIIC krater fragments (fig. 5), and on the sociocultural changes that mark the end of the Bronze Age. This led us to pose the question, What did it mean to be a pirate in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean? In order to answer this question, we turned to anthropology and geography. In doing so, we used material and historical accounts of piracy to find characteristics that were consistent across different groups of pirates in different time periods. Our purpose was to find cultural patterns that we could extrapolate backwards to try and flesh out accounts of the Sea Peoples as pirates. Among the most important characteristics we determined were the culturally entangled nature of piracy, its growth and spread, the economics of pirate activity, the importance of geography (fig. 6), the role of feasting and warrior symbolism (e.g., Jung 2009; Emanuel 2017) in maintaining social cohesion, and the role of the ship as the context for the development of pirate culture. The most important of all of these characteristics, however, is the culturally entangled nature of piracy, which we used to support the notion that a significant portion of the population that comprised the Philistines were not an ethnically pure culture with a single origin, but that they were an outcome of a blended, tribal culture integrating with the Canaanites upon settling in the southern Levant and abandoning piracy. Although we cannot be entirely sure that the pirate interpretation is certain, it does account for the desolation of Cretan coastlines, the

Figure 4. “Treasury of Atreus.” Detail of conglomerate masonry in dromos of tholos tomb (LH III: ca. thirteenth century B.C.E.). Photograph by Brent Davis.

Figure 5. Illustration of a sea battle on a LH IIC Middle sherd from Pyrgos Livanaton. After Mountjoy 2005, from Emanuel 2014: fig. 3a.

Figure 6. Piracy map of the Mediterranean. Arrows indicate currents, shading indicates possible pirate coasts, and octagons indicate choke points from historic eras. Map by Jay Rosenberg, after Galvin 1999: 9.

Figure 7. Palace of Pylos. Hearth and megaron hall with square formation of columns (LH III: ca. thirteenth century B.C.E.). Photograph by Louise A. Hitchcock.

Figure 8. Tiryns, Building T (LH IIIC: ca. twelfth century B.C.E.). Courtesy of Joseph Maran.

destruction of major centers, the cessation of trade, and the multicultural and entangled nature of early Iron Age cultural assemblages.

The Iron Age Begins with the End of the Bronze Age

It is quite possible that the traditional narrative around the appearance of the Philistines as Mycenaean colonizers influenced the tendency to interpret Philistine material remains in terms that were comparable to the palatial societies of the Late Bronze Age. Although Aegean remnants of the palatial era survive throughout the Mediterranean in the early Iron Age (e.g., Hitchcock and Maier 2017), making a direct comparison between the two periods is inappropriate due to the extreme changes in settlement structure characterized by the destruction of many sites and by the absence of monumental worked-stone architecture, writing, and wall painting, as well as changes in the planning of architecture (e.g., substituting a linear arrangement of columns that screen the hearth for a square shaped arrangement of columns that emphasize it), and metalworking technology.

While we should not ignore the Bronze Age completely, it is necessary to let the Iron Age signify on its own terms. What this means is that the Bronze Age collapse brought about significant changes in the Aegean, and rather than expecting things to be the same in the Iron Age, it is necessary to document continuities along with abrupt changes, which took place throughout the Mediterranean. A notorious example of the many inappropriate comparisons that have been made is that of Philistine pebbled hearths and Cypriot clay hearths to the monumental painted plaster hearth in the Mycenaean palace at Pylos (fig. 7; Dothan and Dothan 1992: 245; Dothan 1998: 156–57; Karageorghis 1998: esp. 277; 2002: 87–88). However, if we compare these hearths and the buildings they were housed in to Late Helladic IIIC structures on the Greek Mainland as found at Tiryns, Midea, and Tychos-Dymaion, we gain a more nuanced picture in that the hearth is deemphasized, becoming smaller, and screened off by a row of columns, rather than emphasized through monumentality and a square formation of columns (fig. 8; cf. Maran 2000: 121; Walberg 1995; Papazoglou-Manioudaki and Paschalidis forthcoming). This example illustrates why undertaking a comparative

Figure 9. Pebbled hearths: Strata A5–A6 (Iron Age IA–IB: early-twelfth–early-tenth centuries B.C.E.), Area A, Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi/Gath. Photograph courtesy of Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

analysis between Iron Age sites in the Aegean, Cyprus, and the Levant may hold more—or at least different—relevance.

Regionalism

One of the problems of past approaches to the Philistines is that they were looking at Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi/Gath and other early Iron Age sites outside of their regional context. On one scale we have investigated regionalism among the Philistines and on a broader scale we have investigated regional similarities and differences among other Early Iron Age cultures around the Mediterranean. Giving proper attention to regionalism is a neglected area of not just Philistine studies, but the Mediterranean early Iron Age as a whole. This became very evident when we undertook our study of Philistine pebbled hearths (Maeir and Hitchcock 2011). Pebble hearths (fig. 9) are plentiful at both Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi/Gath and at Tel Mique/Ekron, with greater variations in hearth construction existing among coastal Philistine sites. Yet, the appearance of pebbled hearths represents an almost complete break with Aegean traditions. An area for ongoing research, then, is to have more detailed studies of regionalism within Philistia itself and

to see if this can be correlated to different degrees of cultural entanglement.

Globalized Philistines and Populist Israelites

Throughout history and leading up to present times, human societies have coped with the tensions between globalized urban elites and rural agro-pastoralists. Such tensions may have contributed to the end of the Bronze Age (Hitchcock forthcoming) and may have played out on a smaller scale in the Israelite construct of the Philistines as the ultimate “Other.” Far-flung networks, in this case the sea and maritime activity, which facilitates the flow of goods, people, ideas, and technology, characterize globalization (Friedman 2016). Populist reactions to globalization are often driven by the resentment of foreignness as manifested in new technologies, new habits, and in migrations (Müller 2016: esp. 12). Many of the finds from Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi/Gath both illustrate and demonstrate the artistry, sophistication, and technical expertise of Philistine culture. Their culturally entangled background situates the Philistines in the globalized world of the Late Bronze Age (e.g., Sherratt 2003; Stockhammer, and

Figure 10. (a) Early Philistine II deep bowl, Iron Age I; (b) Late Philistine Decorated Ware jug, Iron Age II. Photographs courtesy of Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

Figure 11. Photographs and drawings of a Late Bronze Age ivory bowl (Iron Age I context), Area A, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath. Photograph courtesy of Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

Figure 12. Hydraulic plaster. Locus 122034 (late Iron Age I), Area A, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath. Photograph courtesy of Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

Hitchcock forthcoming). We see the remnants of this globalized world at Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath in the form of:

- iron-working technology;
- the production of decorated Mycenaean-style pottery followed by Late Philistine Decorated Ware (fig. 10; Ben-Shlomo, Shai, and Maeir 2004);
- foreign feasting habits including the consumption of spices, pork, and wine (Hitchcock et al. 2015);
- the Aegean-style manipulation of a Canaanite-style ivory bowl as a foundation deposit (fig. 11; Maeir et al. 2015);
- hydraulic plaster technology most likely acquired from the Aegean where it had a lengthy history extending back to the beginnings of the Late Bronze Age (fig. 12; Regev et al. 2010);
- the acquisition of faience items and other forms of adornment;
- and undoubtedly new types of rituals involving new types of architectural features such as hearths and columned halls;
- as well as unusual objects such as metal offerings and shells placed on platforms and in small rooms (fig. 13; Hitchcock Maeir, and Dagan 2016).

Without a doubt, such distinctions may have driven the Israelites to cling more closely to their identity by defining themselves as a counter-culture to the Philistines. That said, it may very well be that the strong emphasis in the biblical narrative on enmity and confrontation when describing Israelite–Philistine relations, may in fact be ideologically based, and aspects of interaction may have been sidelined. Thus, while the main focus (and long-term cultural memory) of the Samson narratives in the book of Judges is Samson’s confrontations with the Philistines, aspects of interaction, including intermarriage and other aspects, can be seen. Attempts to define neatly regions in which

Figure 13. *Endolium* shell. Locus 16D93D04 (Iron Age IIA), Area D, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath. Photograph courtesy of Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath Archaeological Project.

the so-called Philistine, Cananite, and Israelite/Judahite cultures are dominant, and which can explicitly be seen archaeologically are quite problematic. This is particularly so in the transition zones between the core areas of these cultures, particularly in the Shephelah (Maeir and Hitchcock 2016). Similarly, while the Philistines are described as a highly martial society in the biblical text, in fact, very few weapons are archaeologically known (Maeir forthcoming).

Beyond the Echo Chambers

Much like the deep political divisions fuelling today's social media echo chambers, some archaeologists working in Philistia and in the Aegean have inhabited their own echo chambers for too long. Interconnected networks and flows of goods, people, and ideas as noted above, characterized the ancient Mediterranean. The benefits of a collaborative approach combining different areas of expertise enable a more holistic view of the Philistine culture, and make it easier to resist privileging one culture, such as the Mycenaeans, over others, such as the Canaanites and the Cypriots. This in turn promotes an understanding of the Philistines as an entangled culture.

The benefits of a comparative approach lie in cross-cultural patterning that may be identified based on common post-palatial changes in social organization, structures, and practices; levels of technology; climate; and geography. It is the search for such patterning that typifies the approach to studying culture in cultural anthropology (e.g., Haviland et al. 2011). The benefit in identifying patterns and differences in the social practices across IIC pottery producing cultures can help to identify both common social practices and regional differences. Finally, while realizing that the Iron Age is a product of the Bronze Age, there is a need to regard the periods and cultures as distinct, with the latter informing, but not defining, the former.

Notes

1. Canaan: Yasur-Landau 2012; Cyprus: Killebrew 2005; Anatolia: Harrison 2009. By "warrior aesthetic" we mean a preference for Italian weaponry and toilet practices, and exotic luxury goods that would be spread by the Sea Peoples (see Jung 2009).

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