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Philistine Facts on the Ground

Ziffer's catalog is an important contribution to literature on Eretz Israel's culture during the biblical period in general, and particularly on the culture of the Philistines.



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"Bisdei plishtim: tashmishei kedusha mignizat mikdash beyavneh" ("In the Field of the Philistines: Cult Furnishings from the Favissa of Yavneh Temple"), catalog from exhibit curated by Irit Ziffer, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, 100 pages (Hebrew) + 32 pages (English)

In December 1948, in his newspaper column "The Seventh Column," Nathan Alterman wrote how impressed he was by the archaeological excavation at Tel Qasile, the first to be conducted in the new State of Israel, which had attained independence the previous May. He could visualize the ancient Israeli housewife's kitchen and nativ... connected the tel (which in Hebrew



creation. Alterman did not mention the fact that Tel Qasile was the site of a small provincial Philistine town, founded on a hill of gravel north of the Yarkon River in the late 12th century B.C.E., and that it survived until the Assyrian campaigns of 734-732 B.C.E.

His reaction was typical of the naive period of Palestinian, or biblical, archaeology, when every archaeological discovery was perceived as a "confirmation of the Bible" and as evidence of the deep roots and continuity of modern Jewish history in Eretz Israel. No ancient Israeli housewife cooked soup in any of the houses in that city; nonetheless, it should be recalled that the "Philistine temples" uncovered at Tel Qasile are similar in design to earlier "Canaanite" temples and indicate a cultural continuity in the region.

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A few magpies are openly proclaiming the death of the "biblical archaeological project" and the concomitant disappearance of "biblical Israel" from the pages of history. These declarations are exaggerated and baseless. The Eretz Israel Museum, the latest "beneficiary" of the Philistine city, is currently featuring an exhibition of cult items from the favissa (a pit or other hidden place reserved for sacred and/or votive objects) of a Philistine temple in Yavneh. The exhibition, a clear product of Israeli archaeological research, presents some of the material culture of the Philistine entity in Eretz Israel – an entity the Bible describes as biblical Israel's greatest enemy – from the beginning of Philistine settlement here until at least King David's reign. The findings date from the ninth century



(located today in downtown Yavneh and identified with the biblical city). They are first and foremost an important contribution to our knowledge of Philistine material culture and the changes it underwent as it was absorbed into the local "Canaanite" culture.

There is considerable irony in the fact that while some scholars deny biblical Israel's existence, few deny the existence of the "biblical Philistines" as an ethnic, cultural entity, although they left no historical documentation behind and we have no way of knowing how they defined themselves. Perhaps it is the Philistines' fate that no one can argue, therefore, that they are the invention of the biblical author; at most, it can be said that their image in the Bible is distorted.

Preserved memory

In any event, the exhibition is definitely a product of local archaeological research and not part of any "project." Nonetheless, it does have ramifications for research on ancient Israel: If the existence of a distinct Philistine entity cannot be doubted and if no one can argue that it is an "invention," why should the existence of a contemporary Israelite entity, its rival, be doubted?

Thanks to the Bible, historical memory has preserved a Philistine existence in Eretz Israel. Although Philistines and Philistia are mentioned in Egyptian



preserved because of another factor. The region in which their chief cities - those of the pentapolis, or grouping of five main urban areas (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron) - were located was called "Philistia"; the meaning of this name was expanded after Bar Kochba's revolt, and used by the Roman regime to denote the province of Palestine-Syria in order to erase the memory of a Jewish national entity. Around the year 400 C.E., the provinces Palaestina Prima and Palaestina Secunda included most of the area of Eretz Israel. After the Arab conquest in the seventh century, Palaestina Prima became the Filistin (Palestine) military district (with Lod, later Ramle, as its capital), while Palaestina Secunda became the Urdun (Jordan) district (with Tiberias as its capital).

In the modern era, the name "Palestine," used to refer to the area of Eretz Israel to the west and east of the Jordan River, became current again in European languages and was also absorbed by Hebrew. The proto-Zionist Hovevei Zion movement and the Zionist movement chose to ignore the context of semantic history and felt perfectly comfortable using "Palestine" to refer to Eretz Israel - even for the purpose of self-definition. Thus, for example, the "Zionists of Zion" (Zionei Zion), who opposed territorialism, called themselves "Palestinians." Mention must be made here of the irony in the term's various incarnations and its uses.

Sometimes the Philistines were defined as part of Eretz Israel's native (autochthonic) population, with the Arab fellahin presented as their direct descendants. For instance, in his book, "The Immovable East" (1913), Philip J. Baldensperger writes that the fellahin of the modern era are the Philistines' true descendants and that their character has not changed over the centuries. The Palestinian national movement appropriated this argument in its attempts to invent an ancient past for itself, describing Eretz Israel's Arab population as being composed - according to the memorandum the Arab Higher Committee submitted to the League of Nations in 1922 - of the descendants of native residents with the addition of Amorite, Hittite, Philistine and other elements. Ironically, the Philistines are recognized as a native population, although they were foreigners who came to settle in Eretz



some of the land here and introduced an "alien culture," which is why some scholars compare them to the Crusaders.

It is therefore not surprising that some of the writers of the "new history" of the ancient Near East reject this description, preferring to write about "so-called Philistines," emphasizing that culture's rapid process of assimilation into the resident population, describing its settlement in Eretz Israel as a gradual, peaceful process, and even describing a "pseudo-Philistine ethnicity."

Large-scale settlement

Nevertheless, scholars generally assume that the initial wave of Philistine settlers - who came from the shores of West Anatolia and were at first sent to live in Egyptian fortifications along Eretz Israel's coast - was the product of the Egyptian kingdom's initiative after the eighth year of Ramses III's reign (1184-1153 B.C.E.). These settlers were not just a thin elitist cadre of military personnel; they constituted a large-scale settlement enterprise. The dispute among scholars revolves around how long the Philistine settlers retained their ethnic and cultural identity. According to one view, the distinctive features of their original culture vanished after only a few generations; according to another view, they preserved their identity until at least the seventh century B.C.E. On this issue, see, for example, Itamar Singer, "Egyptians, Canaanites and Philistines in the Iron I," in Nadav Na'aman and Israel Finkelstein (ed.), "From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel" (1990).

However, the clash between these two positions is only semantic. All scholars acknowledge the disappearance of distinct Philistine cultural characteristics a few generations after the establishment of their settlements; furthermore, all scholars recognize that certain elements survived until the seventh century, as proven by the name of the goddess Ptgyh, mentioned in an Ekron inscription.

The Philistines acquired a negative image in the West's historical awareness



conservative members of the bourgeoisie, who are the enemies of culture. These derogatory terms were used from the 17th century onward. It is commonly accepted that they originated at the funeral service for a student in the German city of Jena, who was killed in a brawl with local residents. The priest eulogizing him quoted from the Book of Judges, "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson" - a reference that was perhaps inspired by the fact that first-year students were called "foxes," while second-year students were "burning foxes." ["And Samson went and caught 300 foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails" (Judges 15:4).] This term, influenced by the fact that the Philistines were considered to have only a material culture, was adopted by leaders of the Romantic movement in Germany and entered the English language through Matthew Arnold's famous book of essays, "Culture and Anarchy."

Not surprisingly, in contemporary historiography, there are those who see the Philistines as "others," who must be rescued from a depiction created in the imagination of both the Bible and Western culture. Paradoxically, the "rescue" is executed not with the help of extra-biblical sources and archaeological findings, but rather through an alternative reading of the Bible (which, for this purpose, becomes a reliable witness!) - a so-called "Philistine reading" that adopts a "Philistine perspective." According to the "Philistine 'other'" advocates, this reading demonstrates that the Bible describes the Philistines not only as arrogant people who can easily be made fools of and who can even be considered "barbarians," but also - at least until the reigns of David and Solomon - as the strongest and most preferred entity, from both the military and cultural standpoints. Furthermore, say these people, such a reading shows that there were friendly neighborly relations as well as contact in other areas between the Philistines and some residents of biblical Israel (the tribes of the southern hill country). Although the Bible presents a very partial, and certainly a distorted, picture of the Philistine entity's history and character and of the neighborly relations and protracted struggle between the Philistines and ancient Israel, this picture is based on a historical reality and on real facts. At appropriate



political, social and cultural reality. Without the deliberately distorted biblical evidence, a vast portion of this picture would have been missing.

Favissa treasures

A rescue excavation conducted in Yavneh in late 2002 uncovered a favissa containing cult items from a Philistine temple that apparently stood nearby. After they could no longer be utilized and after they had been broken, the items were placed in a pit. The restoration of part of the favissa of the Yavneh temple - a treasure-trove of cult-related vessels, including 120 ritual pedestals, two cylindrical pedestals, thousands of bowls and cubes, etc. - was completed in June 2006.

What does the Yavneh favissa contribute to our knowledge of the Philistines' origin, their culture and the manner in which they adopted many of the components of Canaanite culture, including its language? The findings indicate that the Philistines brought with them a new material culture and beliefs originating in the Aegean world. However, we have no way of knowing about the demographic processes they underwent (Were there additional "waves of immigration" after the founding wave, and were there "intermarriages" with the local population?), or about the changes that occurred in the spiritual world of the generations that followed the creation of a Philistine settlement on Eretz Israel's southern coast.

Their material culture, especially the ritual items and the images and symbols incorporated in them, shows that on their way from the coast of West Anatolia to Eretz Israel - and not just by way of the sea - the Philistines may have appropriated some of the Levant's iconography and this process may have been accelerated after they settled here. These transformations indicate a rapid acculturation into the Levant's greater culture, or more precisely, a religious and cultural syncretism.

One fascinating discovery, for example, is the motif of the palm tree - the symbol of fertility, abundance, nourishment and carnal knowledge - that appears on some of the pedestals. (Those interested in the reincarnation of



similar to the one found in Tel Rehov). Another interesting item is the multi-columned pedestals, perhaps a miniature imitation of temples. This finding may prove that the story about Samson toppling the supporting columns of the temple of Dagon is based on a familiarity with the structure of a Philistine temple.

Do certain similarities between various items in the material culture of the Philistines and biblical Israel point to a "Philistine" influence? Different "Philistine" cult artifacts, such as the "bases" - pedestals on wheels - perhaps give us some idea of those that held the lavers in Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 7:23-40); however, the latter were not decorated with iconography that included human images, especially nude women.

The exhibition curated by Dr. Irit Ziffer (who did a wonderful job with the previous exhibition she curated in 1990, "At That Time the Canaanites Were in the Land," and with its catalog) is splendidly organized, thus enabling viewers to look at the exhibits from all four sides. The catalog she wrote is scholarly, carefully executed and highly illuminating. Furthermore, it provides even readers who are not professionals in the field with a fascinating analysis of the findings and their significance, and is an important contribution to the literature on Eretz Israel's culture during the biblical period in general and on the culture of the Philistines within that culture in particular.

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