A 'Repertoire of Otherness'?
Identities in early Iron Age Philistia

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ABSTRACT

Recent study of the Philistine culture of the Iron Age Southern Levant has enabled to suggest a much more complex and multi-faceted understanding of the origins, composition and development of this fascinating culture, first appearing in the transition between the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. In this paper, I discuss the entangled identities that can be identified in Iron Age Philistia, and caution from previous, and in some cases, contemporary, simplistic definitions and understanding of the identity matrix of the Philstines and their relations with neighboring groups and cultures.

Recent studies of the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition in the eastern Mediterranean stress the complex and multi-scalar processes that occurred during this period.[1] Philistia, or the southern Coastal Plain of the Southern Levant (modern day Israel and Palestine) is a focal point in the study of this transitional period, due to the interesting cultural developments occurring in this region, and in particular, the appearance of the Philistine culture.[2]

While the study of the material manifestations of the Philistine culture has been dealt with extensively for more than a century, when issues of identity were discussed,[3] the suggested frameworks were quite simplistic and linear – more or less that you are or you are not a Philistine! It is only quite recently that a complex, multi-faceted, subtle – and I believe more sophisticated approach to the relevant identities has been brought to the forefront. Along these lines, I have suggested that one should look at the complex "identity matrix"[4] in early Iron Age Philistia.[5] While "identity" is hardly an easily observable and/or definable aspect from an archaeological perspective, I believe discussing and debating identity-related issues pertaining to the Philistines – and other early Iron Age groups – is of crucial importance to understand the processes relating to the unfolding of the complex and multifaceted circumstances of the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition.

Elsewhere,[6] I have suggested relating to the various groups in the early Iron Age Southern Levant as "frogs out of pond", paraphrasing the famous quote of Plato (*Phaedro,* section 109b), himself quoting Socrates, describing the human settlement in the Mediterranean region: «[...]like ants and frogs around a pond, we have settled down upon the shores of this sea.»[7]

There, I suggested that these various groups (=frogs), who derived from various foreign origins and/or of indigenous backgrounds, and of very different socio-political and economic settings, all contributed to the matrices of identities at the time, and to the complexity of the processes that occurred during the LB/Iron Age transition. More specifically, in this particular time frame, many of these *frogs*, of diverse origins, can be seen in a defined geographic region, that of the southern Coastal Plain (or Philistia) and the Judean Foothills (or the Shephelah) in the region of current day Israel.

In light of this complex set of overlapping cultures and identities in this region during the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age transition, I believe a close study of the archaeological evidence, and an attempt to study this complex "identity matrix" (as noted above) in this limited region can shed important light on cardinal issues, of both specific and broader significance, in the study of the LB/Iron Age transition.

Recent research on the LB/Iron Age transition in Philistia has shown that the previous paradigms for understanding the origins and development of the Philistine culture are in need of reassessment and revision. Earlier understandings[8] were that the Philistines (and other "Sea Peoples") were by–and–large of Aegean origin, and were responsible for a more or less unified conquest of Philistia by invading forces during the LB/Iron Age transition. In addition, it was thought that there was a straightforward process in which the culture in Philistia during the Iron Age was first heavily influenced by Aegean culture, and later, slowly was influenced by local Levantine facts, eventually assimilating completely into a Levantine culture. And finally, much of the understanding of the history and politics of Philistia during the Iron I and Iron IIA was largely dependent on the biblical narrative – at times more or less accepting it at face value.

This paradigm has been questioned, particularly in the last decade or so. Questions have been raised regarding the assumptions on the underlying mechanisms and processes of the appearance,

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1   Cline 2014; Fischer, Bürge (eds.) 2017.

2   Yasur-Landau 2010; Maeir, Hitchcock 2017a, 2017b.

3   Dothan 1982; Bierling 1992; Oren (ed.) 2000; Faust 2015a; Master, Aja 2017.

4   For the term, see Brunsma, Delgado, Rockquemore 2012.

5   Maeir, Hitchcock 2017a, 2017 b.

6   Maeir in press.

7   Translation following: *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1* translated by Harold North Fowler. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1966.

8   Dothan 1982; Sandars 1985; Oren (ed.) 2000; Stern 2013; many of the papers in Killebrew, Lehmann (eds.) 2013.

Figure 1
Map of the Southern Levant
with the location of Tell es-Safi/Gath
and other sites
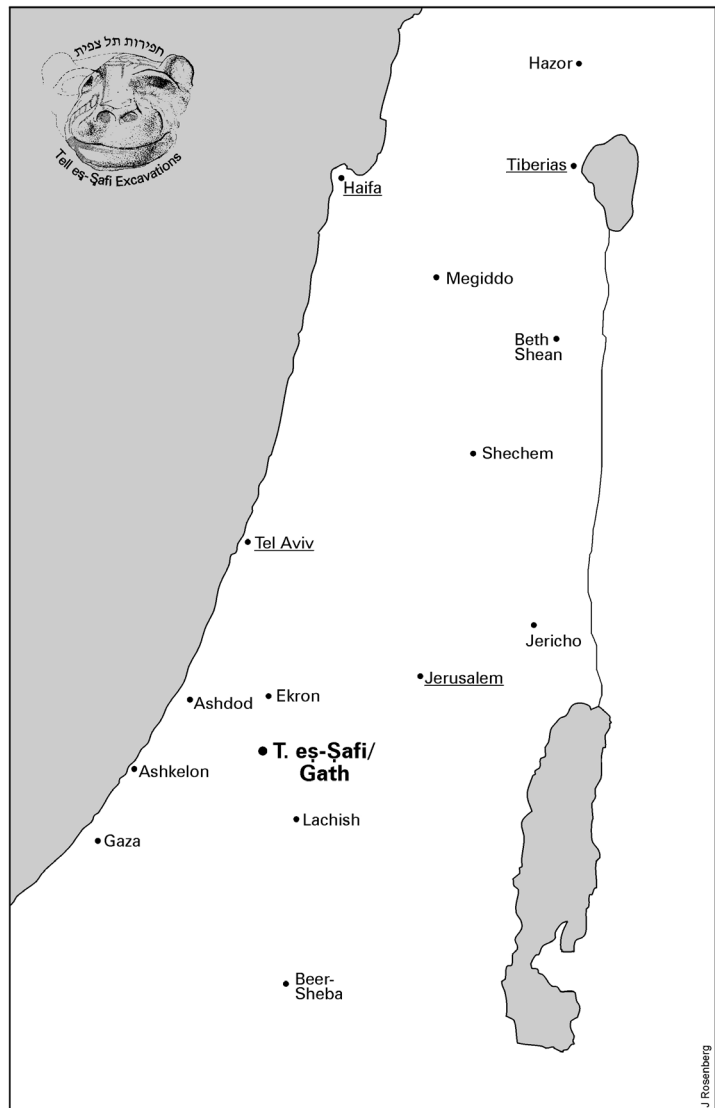
development and makeup of the "Sea Peoples" in general and the Philistines more specifically. Examples of this can be seen in the work of A. Gilboa,[9] Yasur-Landau,[10] Cline,[11] and Emanuel[12] as well as the work of my colleagues and myself, based on our excavations, research and interpretations at Tell es-Safi/Gath for the last two decades or so[13] (figs. 1-3).

Various problems with the earlier understanding have been noted. Little evidence can be found of widespread destruction at the Canaanite sites in Philistia with the arrival or appearance of the Philistines. Similarly, there is mounting evidence that the appearance of the Philistine culture was a drawnout process. Recently, we have claimed that the initial hints to this may have already started in the 13th cent. BCE.[14] However, even if this early date is not accepted,[15] the processes involved in the appearance of earliest manifestations of the Philistine culture

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[9]   Gilboa 2006-2007.

[10]   Yasur-Landau 2010.

[11]   Cline 2014.

[12]   Emanuel 2017.

[13]   Maeir, Hitchcock 2011, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Maeir, Hitchcock, Horwitz 2013; Maeir et al. 2015; Maeir, Davis, Hitchcock 2016; Maeir in press; Hitchcock, Maeir 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Hitchcock

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et al. 2015; Hitchcock, Maeir, Dagan 2016.

[14]   Asscher et al. 2015; Boaretto et al. 2019.
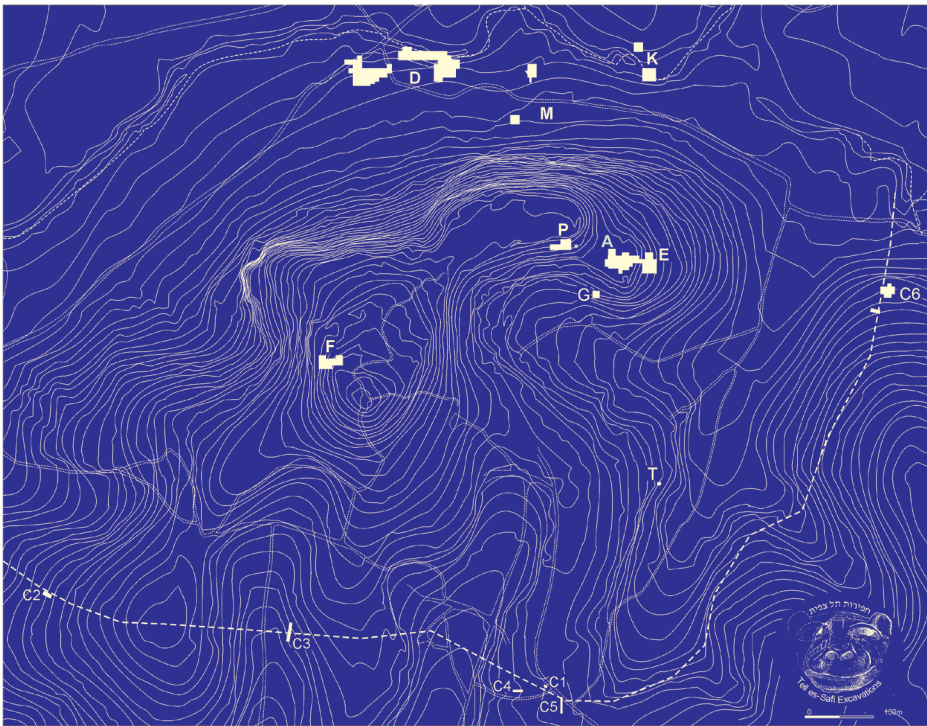
[15]   Finkelstein 2016, 2018.

Figure 2
Plan of site of Tell es-Safi/Gath

Figure 3
Aerial view, looking west, of the upper (left) and lower (right) cities of Tell es-Safi/Gath

FIGURE 4
Examples of decorated Iron Age I Philistine pottery from Tell es-Safi/Gath
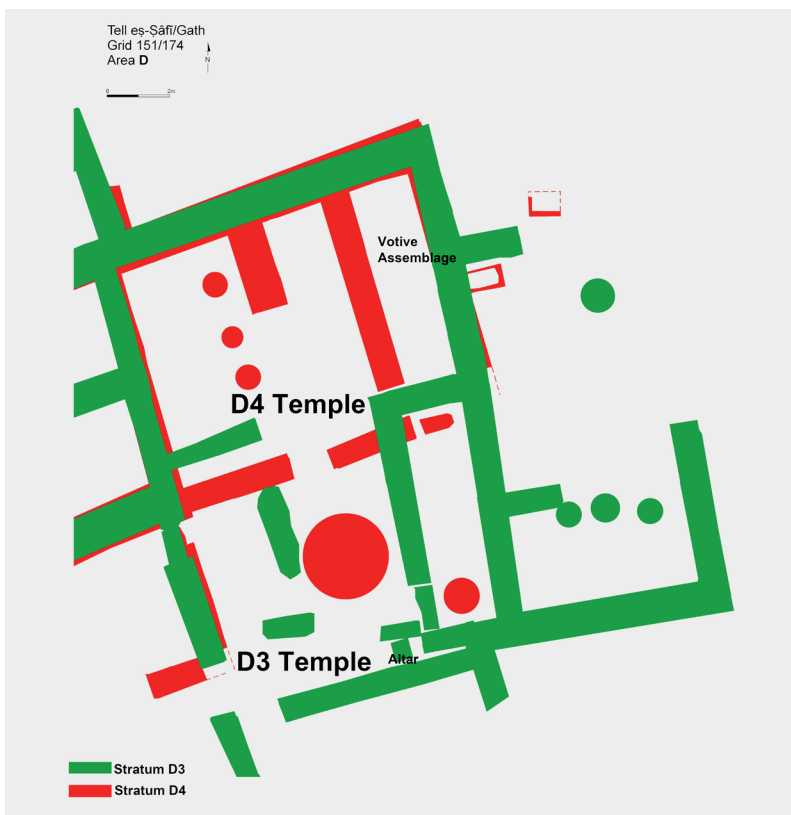

FIGURE 5
Plan of two phases of the temple in Area D West, in the lower city of Tell es-Safi/Gath Stratum D4 (late Iron I/early Iron IIA, ca. 10th/9th century BCE) and Stratum D3 (Iron IIA, late 9th century BCE)

were not a single, uniform and short-lived event, but an extended, drawn out, complex set of processes.

An additional crucial point is that in early Iron Age Philistia, one sees a mixture of various non-local influences – mainland Greece, Crete, western Anatolia, Balkans, Cyprus, and others.[16] Some of these facets are new, and at times foreign, to the region. In fact, this somewhat reminds me of Francois Hartog's[17] term – a "repertoire of otherness" – that we have used for the title of this study. That is, a complex set of cultural markers and identities, brought together.

At the same time, there is abundant evidence that Canaanite material facets continue in early Iron Age Philistia. This hints to the "entangled" character of early Philistine culture, as seen,[18] e.g., in pottery (fig. 4), architecture, cult (fig. 5), diet, various technologies and agriculture. In other words, contrary to earlier understandings, the Philistines were not a group from a specific foreign origin who migrated to Philistia. Rather, they were comprised of mixed and varied origins, local and foreign.[19]

In addition to this, the multi-cultural character of the Philistines, and their appearance during the turbulent LB/Iron Age transition, suggests to us that some of the Philistines might have been comprise of pirate-like elements.[20]

Very often, and even until today, the Philistines were viewed as a colonizing culture.[21] However, what we know about the early Philistine culture – and their relationship with their surroundings from the archaeological remains – as opposed to their image in the biblical text – hardly permits seeing them as a colonizing culture. To suggest a colonial relationship, there must be clear patterns of domination – by one party (the Philistines in this case) on another (the various local Levantine groups). There is no clear archaeological evidence for this.[22]

Changes in the "Philistine paradigm" are seen also after the very early Iron Age. Previously,[23] the understanding of the processes of the transformation of the Philistine culture were quite linear. It was thought that while during the Iron I there were clear indications of foreign influences, these quickly disappeared in the early Iron Age IIA, and from that time onward, the Philistines lost their cultural identity. This was already challenged by Stone,[24] and further developed in recent years.[25] Thus, there is no major break in the 10th cent. BCE, when supposedly the Philistines shed most of their foreign originating facets, supposedly due to the influence and domination of the early Judahite Kingdom. This was very much the view in earlier literature, and in some cases, until today,[26] but this is untenable. In particular, the finds from the excavations at Tell es-Safi/Gath have demonstrated this. In particular, the dominant size and unhampered continuity in settlement at the site up until the late 9th cent. BCE, makes it difficult to suggest that the Judahite Kingdom dominated Philistine Gath, or for that matter other parts of Philistia, prior to ca. 830 BCE, following the destruction of Gath by Hazael.[27]

It is apparent that the character and directionality of the interactions between Philistia and neighboring cultures is far from simple. Earlier research stressed the influences seen in the Philistine culture from the neighboring Levantine communities. More recently, it has been demonstrated that there are significant influences from Philistia on adjacent cultures: in pottery, cult, food preparation, and other facets.[28]

In much of previous research[29] the prevailing view of Philistine language and writing was that: a) the early Philistines spoke a language similar to My-

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[16] Maeir, Hitchcock 2017b; Maeir et al. 2019.

[17] Hartog 2001, pp. 21-36.

[18] Hitchcock, Maeir 2014, 2016a, 2018; Maeir, Hitchcock 2017a, 2017b; Maeir 2019; Maeir et al. 2019.

[19] Yasur-Landau 2010; Hitchcock, Maeir 2013, 2018; Maeir, Hitchcock 2017a, 2017b; Maeir et al. 2019.

[20] Hitchcock, Maeir 2014, 2016b; Emanuel 2017 passim.

[21] Most recently Faust 2015a, 2015b.

[22] Maeir, Hitchcock 2016, pp. 213-214.

[23] Dothan 1982; Gitin 1998.

[24] Stone 1995.

[25] Maeir 2013.

[26] Faust 2015a, 2015b.

[27] Maeir 2017.

[28] Cohen-Weinberger, Szanton, Uziel 2017; Maeir, Hitchcock 2017a, 2017b.

[29] Singer 1994; Cross, Stager 2006; Faust, Lev-Tov 2011, 2014.

cenaean Greek; and b) they used a writing system deriving the Bronze Age Aegean.

The understanding of the Philistine's language was based on a limited number of words and names in the Bible and a few other texts, seemingly implying connections with non-Semitic, Indo-European languages, such as Mycenaean Greek. As to the supposed Philistine writing system(s), this understanding was founded on a very small repertoire of undeciphered inscriptions, seemingly equivalent to Aegean scripts.

After close to 150 years of intensive archaeological research in Philistia, it is apparent these views are not based on much.[30] The various words seem to relate to various languages (not only Mycenaean) – part of a multi-lingual situation. Due to the paucity of inscriptions, it is most likely that as in the Aegean, with the collapse of the Aegean palace system, the need for writing disappeared, so, the peoples amongst the Philistines, who may have originated from the Aegean region, and might have been familiar with the Aegean scripts, had no use for these writing systems in their new environment. Quite simply, these scripts were not needed in the socio-political contexts of early Iron Age Philistia.

The manner in which the Bible,[31] and the Egyptian reliefs,[32] portray the early Iron Age Philistines – is clearly as a militarily powerful and very martial culture. However, after 150 years of research, there is negligible evidence of this.[33] Excavations have revealed only a handful of Philistine weapons (including in the recently excavated cemeteries at Ashkelon and Tel Erani[34]) and there is hardly evidence of trauma in skeletons. I would hardly suggest that the Philistines were pacifists. Nevertheless, this would indicate the need to reassess our understanding of the character of the Philistines, which was previously very much based on ancient ideological narratives and modern understanding.

Thus, it is quite clear that many basic questions relating to the Philistines are in need of fresh ap-

praisal. This includes: what do we know about who the Philistine were? Where did they came from? Of whom were they comprised? What was their socio-economic structure? How their culture developed and transformed? And, what was the nature of their relationships with neighboring cultures?

The very different understanding of the Philistines and their culture reflects as well on how we understand their identity (or identities) and those of communities in the surrounding regions on the other. It is clear that there is the need for a multifaceted interpretation of the definition of identity groups during the early Iron Age. Due to the limited contemporaneous textual materials at our disposal, and our almost complete dependence on the very partial archaeological evidence, I think a bit more caution is called for when attempting to define identities in Philistia and the Southern Levant during the Iron Age.[35]

This is opposed to the often suggested clear-cut classifications of cultural markers and ethnic demarcation,[36] and the confidence in archaeological definition of supposed identity-related-practices, such as circumcision, menstruation, and egalitarianism.[37]

Thus, archaeological research should continue its efforts to understand the complex socio-economic in early Iron Age Philistia and surrounding regions, utilizing the archaeological record, inter- and multi-disciplinary analyses, and sophisticated interpretative frameworks. Similarly, a more subtle and multi-faceted approach to identities should be employed, one in which the very complex, shifting and at times unclear borders and definitions of various types of identities, within and between the different groups are taken into account. However, the limitations of the archaeological data and its interpretation should be kept in mind. The identity matrices and cultural definitions in this region during this period are complex and multifaceted – and our ability to understand them may remain limited, despite our best, ongoing, efforts.

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[30] Davis, Maeir, Hitchcock 2015; Maeir, Davis, Hitchcock 2016; Davis 2018.

[31] Machinist 2000.

[32] Dothan 1982.

[33] Maeir 2018.

[34] Master, Aja 2017; Milevski et al. in press.

[35] Maeir, Hitchcock 2016.

[36] Bunimovitz, Lederman 2011; Faust 2015a, 2015b, 2018; Na'aman 2017.

[37] Faust 2015a, 2015b; Faust, Katz 2017.

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