Philistia and Israel:

The Role of the Philistines in State Formation Processes

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The arrival of the Sea people in the region of the ancient Near Middle East, although predominantly veiled in mystery, is well known to have caused the collapse of the Bronze Age. This violent and unrelenting invasion of foreign peoples has brought about the end of empires and fundamentally changed societies, yet the state of Israel survived and went on to thrive. The closeness of borders between the Philistine invaders and Israel gave birth to rising regional tensions and wars that had a lasting hardening effect on the core of the Israelite state. The Philistines were directly involved in the ascension of David, the most formidable Israelite king when they defeated King Saul and drove him to take his own life. King David's subsequent rule over the twelve tribes of Israel set the grounds for the solidification of the state and his victories over the Philistines permanently changed their role in the region. This study will focus on determining the extent of influence that the Philistine nation has had over the process of the Israelite state formation. This will be done through an in-depth strategic analysis of the available archeological and literary data.

The arrival of the sea-peoples in the region of the ancient near east corresponds with the reign of Ramses III in the 12th century BCE. Ramses III is known as the last great monarch of the New Kingdom in Egypt specifically because of his struggles with the sea-people, as well as with the Libyans and Canaanites. Being a warrior king, Ramses wished to highlight his military accomplishments in his mortuary monument in Thebes; he thus depicted his battles with the sea-

peoples on his temple at Medinet Habu, portraying his Egyptian forces as victorious. In this depiction on the northeast outside wall, Ramses is portrayed as being a towering larger-than-life figure that leads and orchestrates the attack on the invaders. He is guided and protected by Horus, the falcon-headed god, and has under his feet, a multitude of subjugated enemies. The scene of the battle itself is typical of Egyptian narratives where they are everlastingly victorious. The Egyptian forces are disciplined, in tight formation and their ships are successfully defeating the invaders and capsizing their boats. Although this depiction does not go into detail on identifying who the invaders were, the Papyrus Harris I which was found at the location of the same temple sheds a light on the identities and names of the so-called sea-peoples. In these records, we are informed of the presence of the Tjekker, Denyen, Sharduna, Weshesh, and Peleset. The Philistines have been identified with the Peleset based on the unmistakable similarities in names. Ramses III describes slewing many invaders and taking them as slaves together with their wives and children. Some of these prisoners are settled by Ramses in cities along the coastal planes of the Levante; this theory is in harmony with later Philistine sites.

In biblical literature, the Philistines are recorded to have originated from Caphtor; this is made clear in Genesis 10:14, as well as in Jeremiah 47:4 and Amos 9:7. Caphtor has been identified as being the Island of Crete, thus associating the Philistines with the Aegean civilization of the Minoans. Although we have a location of origin from which the invasion commenced, it is still unclear whether the culture of the Philistines can be pinned down or limited to an exact geographical or cultural origin[1]. Rather than one single specific cultural origin, a more mixed and heterogeneous one can be observed. Although Philistine culture shows various elements, all of them remain western in culture. This being in accordance with the

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[1] Maeir, Aren M. "Philistine and Israelite Identities: Some Comparative Thoughts." *Die Welt Des Orients* 49, no. 2 (2019): 151-60. Accessed February 23, 2021. doi:10.2307/26899524.

vaguer description given by Ramses of the sea-peoples as originating from the northern countries. Artifacts, pottery, and typical Aegean architecture were found in many Philistine-occupied cities as further proof of the link between them and the Aegean world. If the site of Ekron is considered as a specific example, all three aforementioned aspects can be located. A typical Greek megaron temple can be found at Ekron from during the time of the earliest Philistine-occupation of the city. The Ashdoda figurine, an antropomorfas chair, has been excavated in this site; this artifact with feminine features undoubtedly indicates a direct link with other Greek antropomorfas figurines that can be found in the Athens National Museum. Alongside these, a multitude of typical Philistine bichrome pottery can be found at most sites in Philistia. This type of Philistine ware can be identified with the design, motif, and structure of pottery from the Greek world. The causation of this migration of sea-peoples is not fully understood yet, and its origins can only be explained by speculation. Great seismic disturbances, volcanic eruptions, and supposed famines are all valid theories proposed by historians as the reason for the displacement of the sea-peoples. The plain of Philistia is home of the Pentapolis which included Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron.

The region where the Philistines invaded was already populated by Hebrew Israelites and Canaanites. Both of these peoples had to face times of hostilities with the arrival of these Philistines. Canaanites, initially took the full brunt of the invasion as their cities were closer to the coastline. Canaanite cities like Tel Beth-Shemesh have, in the past, been thought of as a mark of Philistine hegemony due to the apparent abundance of pottery that was found there during the initial excavations at the beginning of the 20th century. The site, in fact, reflects Canaanite resistance on their coastline border against the Philistine attempt at cultural hegemony, rather than Philistine dominance. Archeologists have observed and praised Canaanites' strong cultural

continuity. Earlier excavations report from this site have been accused at times of having a research agenda behind some peculiar suggestions where it was supposed that the Beth-Shemesh was inhabited by Israelites and governed by Philistines; this conclusion being drawn to accommodate the biblical claim that Beth-Shemesh was an Israelite border city. Thanks to the earlier excavations, an unfounded archaeological hypothesis was created according to which the site was either directly ruled by the Philistines or at least heavily influenced by their culture. The later excavations in the 1990s yielded a multitude of proof of the Canaanite resistance of Philistine cultural assertiveness. Specific Canaanite pottery models were discovered as well as typical Canaanite oil pressing models and a 12th century BCE alphabetic inscription was discovered at the site. Moreover, the amount of Philistine pottery turned out to be much less than initially estimated. Thus, furthering the idea that the Canaanites put in a great deal of effort to maintain their cultural continuity. Though the site of Beth-Shemesh maintained its cultural integrity for a longer period of time, other Canaanite settlements were not so fortunate. Canaanite cities were destroyed during the invasion of Southern coastal plains. Due to the Philistine settlement process, the coastal Canaanite settlements of Shephelah went from being the most densely populated area in the region to being slowly drained of settlers to a point of total abandonment. The Canaanite rural population of the newly settled Philistine territory was forcibly relocated into the main Philistine urban regions as a way of strengthening their state. Although Philistine dominance was enforced on the conquered Canaanite population, their pressing resistance to cultural change is clear[2]. If a state with such a determined population could not repel the invasion of these sea-peoples, the Israelites could have doubtlessly been in a similar situation soon. Israel bordered this restless new neighbor and it could have been the next victim

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[2] Bunimovitz, Shlomo, and Zvi Lederman. "Canaanite Resistance: The Philistines and Beth-Shemesh — A Case Study from Iron Age I." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 364 (October 2011): 37–51

of its cultural and geopolitical domination if it did not focus its resources and efforts towards tackling this issue.

The arrival of the Philistines brought with it innovation, sophistication, and technologies that Israel did not have access to beforehand. In 1 Samuel 13:19-22, it is stated that the Israelites did not have iron technology available to them. They had to go down to Philistia to sharpen their farming utensils and it goes without saying that the Philistines did not wish to share these innovations with their enemies. Later, when Saul lost the battle fought against the Philistines, only his son and he possessed iron weapons, the rest of his soldiers were relegated to outdated late-bronze age equipment which undoubtedly played a significant role in their defeat. The Israelites did not face a simple invading force but rather a sophisticated technologically advanced enemy that was bent on challenging them in all possible ways. This exhausting affair no doubt motivated a great deal of change and mobilization on the Israelite side. A charismatic young leader would have to undertake the task of securing the sovereignty of the state of Israel; David would later have to assume this role.

During the said battle at the mountain of Gilboa, Saul, after seeing that the tides of the conflict were decisively turning against his forces, resolved to take his own life. Constant conflict with the Philistines had plagued the reign of Saul for a prolonged period of time, and the fact that he perished as a direct result of this conflict, accurately summarizes this period of hostilities. After the Philistines found the lifeless corpse of Saul and his sons, they proceeded to decapitate them and display them on top of the Beit Shean walls. The sight of the defeated king could be observed from many miles around the Jezreel valley and no doubt, this was the Philistine intention. The message sent by the Philistines was clear, the king of Israel is dead, his sons and heirs perished with him, and his kingdom would soon follow. It was under these

desperate circumstances that David ascended to the throne of Israel. As king, David decided not to confront the Philistines immediately, but rather take a detour and capture Jerusalem. Then David moved against the advancing Philistine army and defeated them, slaughtering the last of them at a location with poplar trees. Soon, David would go on and conquer the regions of Canaan and subjugate them. With the Philistines pacified and because this would only last for a certain period of time, David turned his attention to building the state and uniting the tribes together under a stable government.

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