

## Food or Drink? Pork or Wine? The Philistines and their “Ethnic” Markers

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of the paper is to review the value and usefulness of the ethnic-markers of ancient societies, based on the assumption that certain populations practice certain eating and drinking habits. In other words, the conviction that some food and drink habits may be used as reliable tools for determining the ethnicities of ancient societies will be questioned. This argument is applied to the case of the Philistines, a population of Aegean or Aegeo-Anatolian origin, who settled in Palestine in the early twelfth century BCE.

**Key words:** the Philistines, pork, taboo, wine, Palestine, Iron Age.

The Bible uses few categories to distinguish the Philistines. These enemies of Israel were un-circumcised (Jdg 14,3; 15,19; 1 Sam 17,26; 17,36, 2 Sam 1,20), which constitutes clear opposition because the Israelites practiced this rite as a sign of their covenant with God (Gen. 17,10-13). The Philistines (according to the Scriptures) lived, for the most part, in five cities (Gaza, Gath, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron), which in the literature were misleadingly called the Philistine *Pentapolis*. Other features pointing to the dissimilarity between the Hebrews and the Philistines are urban types of settlements of the latter, and their great skills in metallurgy and efficiency in military techniques.

However, the scholarly literature has adopted (and uses extensively) two other criteria to identify the Philistines including the consumption of pork meat and the use of decorated pottery, typical for the drinking of wine. As far as pork consumption is concerned, this criterion is based on two pieces of evidence: the increase of the number of pork bones, excavated at Philistine sites dating back to the Iron Age, and the Biblical taboo prohibiting the consumption of pork (Lev 11,7). A correlation of these two facts has led some scholars to believe

(sometimes unreflectively) that pork remains provide straightforward proof of the presence of non-Hebrew populations, including the Philistines.

Obviously, the abovementioned reasoning is based on a few presuppositions, and as such should not be accepted uncritically. Over fifteen years ago Brian Hesse and Paula Wapnish published a now classical paper on using pig remains to determine ethnicities in the Ancient Near East. This paper constitutes a turning point in using pig remains as the indicator of ethnicity, or rather, not using them as an ethnic indicator.<sup>1</sup> Despite scholarly discussions on methodological issues, including (and following) the Hesse and Wapnish publications, one still witnesses the misunderstanding and misuse of the archaeological data.

Firstly, pig bones are being excavated from sites in Palestine that are not exclusively in strata dated to the Philistines' presence. Therefore this factor cannot be used as a positive indicator of ethnicity (i.e. the pig remains indicate such and such an ethnic group), but rather as a negative one: the lack of pig bones may indicate ethnic changes. As a matter of fact, the presence of pig bones does not necessarily indicate ethnic changes in a population. It may follow the changes in climate, economic shifts, or social phenomena (nomads tend not to breed pigs, while settled groups often do), or even the changes and developments of religions.

Secondly, the conviction that the Biblical ban on pig consumption, expressed openly in Leviticus Chapter 11 (let us ignore chronological issues for now), proves that Israelites and proto-Israelites restrained from pork is quite naïve.<sup>2</sup> Such an attitude represents simple pious, anachronistic, wishful thinking. In general, the combination of

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1. Brian Hesse, Paula Wapnish, "Can Pig Remains Be Used for Ethnic Diagnosis in the Ancient Near East?" in N.A. Silberman and D. Small (eds), *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 238-270. See also Brian Hesse, "Animal Use at Tel Miqne-Ekron in the Bronze Age and Iron Age," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 264 (1986), pp. 17-27; Noa Raban-Gerstel, Guy Bar-Oz, Irit Zohar, Ilan Sharon, and Ayelet Gilboa, "Early Iron Age Dor (Israel): A Faunal Perspective," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, vol. 349 (2008), pp. 25-59.

2. E.g. Avraham Faust and Justin Lev-Tov, "The Constitution of Philistine Identity: Ethnic Dynamics in Twelfth to Tenth Century Philistia," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 30/1 (2011), pp. 13-31, esp. pp. 18-21; Avraham Faust and Hayah Katz, "Philistines, Israelites and Canaanites in the Southern Trough Valley During the Iron Age I," *Agypten und Levante* 21 (2011), pp. 231-247, esp. pp. 239-240.

arguments derived from archaeological finds with arguments from the study of the Bible should be done with special caution.

That being said, one must return to the facts. The presence of pig bones at Philistine sites is a well-known phenomenon. Stratum XII in Ashdod is an interesting example.<sup>3</sup> The ratio of animal bones included: 58.8% Ovicaprine, 14.7% Pigs, 10.3% Sheep, 7.3% Cattle, 5.9% Goat, 1.5% Dog and 1.5% Fish. In Stratum XI the ratio changed considerably: 66.1% Cattle, 9.8% Ovicaprine, 8% Pigs, 8% Equids, 4.5% Sheep, 1.8% Fish, 0.9% Goat and 0.9% Dog. There are not enough remains from later strata to venture any generalizations.

Justin Lev-Tov compares the percentages of pig bones in the finds from two Philistine sites: Gath and Ekron.<sup>4</sup> The results of the comparisons of these data, from two large cities of (undoubtedly) Philistine population, point to differences in pork consumption. In Gath, the percentage remains stable: 13% in Iron Age I, 13% in Iron Age IIA and 16% in Iron Age IIB. However, in Ekron one witnesses a radical drop: from 18% in Iron Age I to 5% in Iron Age IIA and 3% in Iron Age IIB. As a result of these figures, one may conclude that these two neighbouring Philistine cities practiced their pork consumption differently.

Analogical research was conducted at the non-urban Philistine site of Qubur al-Walaydah.<sup>5</sup> The faunal remains from the stratum dated to Iron Age IIB (the 8th-7th centuries BCE) consisted of large numbers of sheep bones with a total absence of pig bones. This result is especially striking because the material culture found in earlier strata leave no doubt about its purely Philistine identity. This particular change may be due to processes taking place in the region over the course of time, and one cannot exclude the strong impact of the local Semitic population. Alternatively, the differences between urban (Ashdod, Gath) and semi-rural (Qubur al-Walaydah) sites may constitute the key factor effecting the scale of pork consumption.

However, discrepancies in the percentages of pig bones in Gath and Ekron, and Qubur al-Walaydah, indicate that the presence of pig bones (or lack thereof) should no longer be used as an absolute, direct or

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3. Edward F. Maher, "Faunal Remains", in M. Dothan, D. Ben-Shlomo, Z. Gal, A. Sussman (eds), *Ashdod VI: The Excavations of Areas H and K 1968-1969* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority 2005), pp. 283-290.

4. Justin Lev-Tov, "A Preliminary Report on the Late Bronze and Iron Age Faunal Assemblages from Tell es-Safi/Gath," in A.M. Maeir (ed), *Tell es-Safi/Gath I: The 1996-2005 Seasons. Part I: Text* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), p. 610.

5. Edward F. Maher, "Late Iron Age Faunal Remains from Qubur al-Walaydah", *Die Welt des Orients* 40.2 (2010), pp. 268-272.

irrefutable proof of the ethnic identities of ancient people.<sup>6</sup>

This reasoning is, however, complicated by the addition of new data. Israel Finkelstein and Steve Weiner, during the course of the realisation of their ERC grant, undertook DNA analysis of the faunal remains from archaeological sites in Israel. This study included the genetic analysis of pig bones, and the results are significant. The pig bones found in Israel, in sites dated to Iron Age I, belonged to the European pig species, in contrast to the remains originating from the Bronze Age strata, which were Asiatic species.<sup>7</sup> The most plausible explanation is that the Sea Peoples took with them (from their homelands) their own pigs, which replaced the aboriginal Asiatic species.

In light of this information, using the straightforward hypothesis linking pork consumption with the ethnic identity of the Philistines must be limited, or even abandoned. If pork consumption had been the imminent distinguishing factor of the Philistine *ethnos*, the same ratio of pig remains in two similar Philistine cities should be expected. As we have seen, there is no one pattern in the case of the urban Philistine site and the non-urban one. In order to explain this information, arguments about economic differences and local specifics were introduced. And as of now, unfortunately, there is no satisfactory way to correlate the economic status of a site and organization of food supplies to draw general patterns of pig breeding and pork consumption.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, without specific ways to link pork consumption with ethnicity, and no obvious economic explanation of pig propagation, one should look in other directions to explain the phenomenon of changing percentages of pig remains in archaeological finds. I propose that the major factor, which seems to have been overlooked until now,

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6. See Aren M. Maeir, Louise A. Hitchcock, Liora Kolska-Horwitz, "On the Construction and Transformation of Philistine Identity," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 32/1 (2013), pp. 1-38, esp. pp. 4-6; Gunnar Lehmann, "Cooking pots and loomweights in a 'Philistine' village: preliminary report on the excavations at Qubur el-Walaydah, Israel," in V. Karageorghis and O. Kouka (eds), *On Cooking Pots, Drinking Cups, Loomweights and Ethnicity in Bronze Age Cyprus and Neighboring Regions. An International Archaeological Symposium held in Nicosia, November 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> 2010* (Nicosia: A. G. Leventis Foundation, 2011), pp. 287-314.

7. Israel Finkelstein, oral communication. See also Lidar Sapir-Hen, Guy Bar-Oz, Yuval Gadot and Israel Finkelstein, "Pig Husbandry in Iron Age Israel and Judah: New Insights Regarding the Origin of the 'Taboo'," *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 129 (2013), pp. 1-20.

8. Assaf Yasur-Landau, *The Philistines and Aegean Migration at the End of the Late Bronze Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 287-299.

is cultic practice.

Animal bones found at archaeological sites in Israel are usually interpreted as hints to understanding the cuisine and diets of ancient people. It seems that scholars have sometimes neglected the fact that most animal meat was consumed in antiquity in connection with sacrificial activity. Keeping this in mind, one should remember that when archaeologists find animal remains they reflect, on one hand, the evidence of meat consumption, but on the other, the sacrifice of the animal. Animal meat was too expensive for daily use,<sup>9</sup> and it is not necessary to find faunal remains within *temenos* or nearby temples to conclude a sacrificial connotation. There is, of course, no difficulty in imagining a family eating a meal of meat at home, after sacrificing it as an offering in the temple.

I therefore suggest the interpretation of the evidence of pigs (or lack thereof) at archaeological sites is a reflection of local cultic practice. In such a way, the percentage of animal species found in the stratum may indicate the percentage of sacrificial animals.

This hypothesis may help to explain the particularities and discrepancies in pig remains distribution across Philistine sites. Unfortunately, we still know very little about the cults and religions of Philistia during the Iron Age. Biblical and archaeological data allows for only very vague generalizations. Despite this, I am inclined to believe that the presence of pig bones may indicate a particular kind of cult, similarly as dog bones do. I can only suggest that this is a possible solution.

Another distinctive feature of the Philistines in Iron Age I, according to the scholarly literature, is the presence of elegant pottery imitating Mycenaean decorations (Myc. IIIC:1b), or the so-called Monochrome and Bichrome wares. Shortly after the settlement of the Philistines in Canaan, 'Philistine' pottery spread very quickly across Palestine. Ware decoration seems to imitate the Aegean style, and then there is no doubt that the spread of the pottery is linked to the population importing this style, i.e. the Philistines. The traditional (and still common) way of joining archaeological finds to ethnic groups leads scholars to believe that territory containing Philistine pottery equals the presence of Philistines.<sup>10</sup> For example, Aharon Kempinski,

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9. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 67-68.

10. Methodological doubts in regard of using material culture as an ethnic indicator were expressed e.g. by: Shlomo Bunimowitz, "Problems in the 'Ethnic' Identification of the Philistine Material Culture," *Tel Aviv* 17 (1990), pp. 210-222; Israel Finkelstein, "Pots and People Revisited: Ethnic Boundaries in the Iron Age I," in

on the basis of the abundance of Philistine pottery, described building 2072 in Megiddo stratum VIA (ca. 1100–1000 BCE), inhabited mostly by a local population of Canaanite origin, as the residence of the Philistine ambassador.<sup>11</sup> The case of Megiddo may be unique because finds of so-called ‘anchor seals’, typical of the Philistines, or some features of urban-planning may point to the direct influence and presence of the Philistines.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, does this suggest that every time there is the presence of Philistine pottery it should be interpreted as an indicator of a Philistine presence?

The distribution of pottery over Palestine can be very instructive. The most telling aspect may be the territory without any such pottery. One may interpret this map as a cartographical illustration of the climax of Philistine domination in the 11th and 10th centuries BCE. Interestingly enough, the territory with no traces of Philistine ware used for elegant aristocratic banquets matches the territory of Israel’s ethnogenesis. One may believe that the Philistines simply did not enter these highlands. I do not accept this view, because there is no reason why the dominating Philistines would have left part of the land unoccupied. Why should they leave the Ephraim highlands to proto-Israelites, while establishing their strongholds in the Jordan Valley (Beth-Shean, Deir-Alla), in the North (Hazor, Megiddo), or in numerous cities in the South? I believe that there is another feature to be considered, and the key lies in the function of Mycenaean-style pottery.

Elegant and expensive pottery used for ceremonial aristocratic banquets was considered to be an obvious and easy to distinguish

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N.A. Silberman and D. Small (eds), *The Archaeology of Israel...*, pp. 216-237. See also Ilan Sharon, “Philistine Bichrome Painted Pottery: Scholarly Ideology and Ceramic Typology,” in S.R. Wolff (ed), *Studies in the Archaeology of Israel and Neighboring Lands in Memory of Douglas L. Esse*, (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2001), pp. 555-609, and recently Asaf Yasur-Landau, “Under the Shadow of the Four-Room House. Biblical Archaeology Meets Household Archaeology in Israel,” in Th.E. Levy (ed), *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future. The New Pragmatism* (London: Equinox, 2010), pp. 142-155; Ann Killebrew, “The Philistines and their Material Culture in Context. Future Directions of Historical Biblical Archaeology for the Study of Cultural Transmission,” in *ibid.*, pp. 156-167.

11. Aharon Kempinski, *Megiddo. A City-State and Royal Centre in North Israel* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1989), pp. 82-83. See Timothy P. Harrison, *Megiddo 3. Final Report on the Stratum VI Excavations* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2004), pp. 105-106.

12. Baruch Halpern, “The Down of an Age: Megiddo in the Iron Age I,” in J.D. Schloen (ed), *Exploring the “Longue Durée.” Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2009), pp. 151-163, esp. p. 157.

status marker. The owners of such sets of pottery informed their rivals and dependents that their position was firm, and their domination easy to see. The pottery may have served as ostentatious proof of their social and economic status. Only the elites could have afforded such a luxury, and only they had means to adopt the habits of aristocratic banquets.

What can be inferred from the lack of Philistine pottery in the Ephraim highland? The result does not lead to a naïve hypothesis of the political independence of proto-Israelites from the hegemony of the Philistines. The result provides more information about the type of population living there. Proto-Israelites were living in small villages, and their fairly homogenous society was ‘flat’, as far as the social strata are concerned. In such a community of countrymen (in opposition to the urban dwellers) it was quite difficult to obtain surplus that allowed for such luxury goods. Additionally, in such an egalitarian society, the need to show one’s social superiority over others was very limited. In flat societies status-markers are useless.<sup>13</sup>

In summary, one may ask whether indicators such as pork-consumption and wine drinking are useful criteria for establishing the Philistine *ethnos*. The answer is ambiguous. On one hand, the straightforward assumption that seeing the presence of both or one of these criteria as obvious proof of the presence of the Philistines should be abandoned. On the other hand, such data should not be overlooked and ignored. Examined in a broader context and incorporating a wider spectrum of information, they may provide precious pieces of evidence for historians and archaeologists. These aspects taken together may shed light on the ethnic, economic, social, religious and cultural lives of Ancient Palestine.

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13. Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spanò, “The Philistines in Jerusalem? The Use of Archaeological Data as the Ethnic Marker: the Case of the Philistines, Other ‘Sea Peoples’, and Judah”, in L. Bombardieri, A. D’Agostino, G. Guarducci, V. Orsi, S. Valentini (eds), *SOMA 2012. Identity and Connectivity: Proceedings of the 16th Symposium on Mediterranean Archaeology, Florence, Italy, 1–3 March 2012* (Oxford: Archaeopress 2013), pp. 89-96.