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*The Shephelah during the Iron Age*  
Recent Archaeological Studies

*“ . . . as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the Shephelah ”*  
*(1 Kings 10:27, 2 Chronicles 1:15)*

*edited by*

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# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	vii
AREN M. MAEIR AND ODED LIPSCHITS	
Four Seasons of Excavations at Tel Azekah: The Expected and (Especially) Unexpected Results . . . . .	1
ODED LIPSCHITS, YUVAL GADOT, AND MANFRED OEMING	
Swinging on the “Sorek Seesaw”: Tel Beth-Shemesh and the Sorek Valley in the Iron Age . . . . .	27
SHLOMO BUNIMOVITZ AND ZVI LEDERMAN	
Tel Burna: A Judahite Fortified Town in the Shephelah . . . . .	45
ITZHAQ SHAI	
Tel Gezer Excavations 2006–2015: The Transformation of a Border City . . . . .	61
STEVEN M. ORTIZ AND SAMUEL R. WOLFF	
Tell Halif in the Late Bronze and Iron Age . . . . .	103
ODED BOROWSKI	
The Iron Age City of Khirbet Qeiyafa . . . . .	115
YOSEF GARFINKEL	
Philistine Gath after 20 Years: Regional perspectives on the Iron Age at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath . . . . .	133
AREN M. MAEIR	
The Archaeology and History of Tel Zayit: A Record of Liminal Life . . . . .	155
RON E. TAPPY	
Settlements and Interactions in the Shephelah during the Late Second through Early First Millennia BCE . . . . .	181
IDO KOCH	





## Philistine Gath after 20 Years: Regional perspectives on the Iron Age at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath

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### Introduction

The ongoing archaeological project at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath, now at the beginning of its third decade in the field, is in the envious position of being one of the longest-running, ongoing projects currently working in the region of the Shephelah (fig. 1). As such, we have benefited in our research from the various projects that have worked in this and adjacent regions before us and alongside us, and most importantly, from the “boom” of projects that have commenced in the Shephelah in the last few years. This situation enables current research, at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath specifically and the region in general, to move beyond “the basics”—such as the rudimentary study of the regional material culture—and to deal with various, and in many cases, broader issues.

In the following pages, I do not intend to recapitulate the many finds and results from the Iron Age that have been found at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath since the beginning of the project (see, e.g., Maeir 2012a; 2012c; 2013a; Maeir and Uziel in press) but rather to utilize this platform to discuss a choice set of specific finds and issues that relate to the site itself, as well as to consider wider issues that are of relevance to the understanding of central issues in Iron Age archaeology in the Shephelah and beyond.

### The Development of the Philistine Culture and Its Ramifications

Study of the Philistine culture in the last decade or so has brought about quite a major change in the understanding of the Philistines and their culture. This includes major revisions on aspects such as: who the Philistines were; the origins of their culture and of the populations in Iron Age Philistia; the sociocultural processes that occurred during the Iron Age in Philistia; the character of the relations between the Philistines and neighboring Levantine cultures; and more.

By and large, these new conceptual frameworks are based on the finds from the excavations in Philistia and surrounding regions and, in particular, from those of

recent, state-of-the-art excavations. The finds from Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath and their analyses have contributed substantially to a better understanding of many of these issues (and by and large, have been extensively published elsewhere). Briefly, I would like to mention some of the more interesting insights that have developed out of our excavations at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath and discuss some of the issues relevant for the Iron Age Shephelah in general.

While many researchers unsuccessfully have searched for the homeland of the Philistines in this or that specific region, cumulative research on early Philistine culture indicates that one cannot speak of a single place of origin; rather, the early Philistine population is comprised of peoples of mixed origins, from various places in the eastern and central Mediterranean, who settled among local Canaanites. This is exemplified by many different cultural influences seen in early Iron Age Philistia—not Mycenaean, Cypriote, Anatolian, or a single other cultural origin, but a combination of many (e.g., Maeir, Hitchcock, and Horwitz 2013; Frumin et al. 2015). We have argued that early Philistine culture should be seen as an “entangled” culture (e.g., Hitchcock and Maeir 2013; 2014; 2017; Davis, Maeir, and Hitchcock 2015; Maeir and Hitchcock 2016; in press; Maeir, Davis, and Hitchcock 2016).

In addition, the sociocultural background of the Philistines is far from clear, and the circumstances under which the Philistines appeared, in the general context of the terminal Late Bronze Age Mediterranean world, are simply not known. We have suggested (e.g., Hitchcock and Maeir 2014; 2017) that major groups of early Philistine peoples may have been pirate-like in nature, in the context of the collapse of the Late Bronze Age system in the late 13th and early 12th centuries BCE.

Thus, I can only reiterate that close attention should be paid to the complex cultural, ethnic, and geographic origins of the Philistines, and the reflection of these origins in the processes, influences, and mechanisms seen in early Iron Age Philistia and surroundings. Otherwise, simplistic monolithic explanations of the cultural dynamics during this time in this and surrounding regions will still be proposed.

### On a Supposed “Canaanite Enclave” in the Iron I Shephelah

In sundry recent discussions on the early Iron Age of southern Canaan, and on Philistia and the Shephelah in particular, it has been suggested that a distinct Canaanite entity existed in the Shephelah, situated between the Philistines to the west and the Israelites on the east. As noted below, I believe this view is not without problems (for a more extensive discussion on this issue, see Maeir and Hitchcock 2016).

The very question of how to identify a site as being associated with the Philistine culture and, even more basically, how the various levels of “Philistine identity” can be archaeologically defined, have been extensively discussed. Some of these attempts to differentiate between the “Philistines” and other ethnicities, based on a small set of material correlates, have led to simplistic or simply mistaken

differentiations. As noted in the past, many of these cultural attributes can appear on both sides of the supposed Philistine/Israelite ethnic boundaries—and even beyond (Hitchcock and Maeir 2013; Maeir, Hitchcock, and Horowitz 2013). There is no doubt that the material assemblages at major sites in Iron Age Philistia are different from those of sites in regions associated with other groups (Israelite, Judahite, Phoenician, etc.). Nonetheless, specific types of objects can be seen in many areas and used by many groups (such as pottery types appearing in different cultural areas; see, e.g., Ben-Shlomo et al. 2008). The appearance of supposedly Philistine objects should not be seen as necessarily indicating the expansion of the Philistine culture into other zones and, similarly, the appearance of Israelite/Judahite facets among the Philistines. Instead, artifact assemblages should be examined in their broader contexts in order to draw out various cultural encounters, relationships, and entanglements, as well as to elucidate new ones (e.g., Ross 2012).

Philistine cultural identity is often seen as set in binary opposition to Israelite group identity, with this “otherness” as a major impetus for the formation of Israelite identity (e.g., Faust 2013a; 2013b; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; Faust and Lev-Tov 2011; 2014). But a straightforward connection between the ideologies reflected in the biblical text and the archaeological record is problematic. To start with, most of the assumptions regarding the antagonistic relationship between the Philistines and the “Israelites” are based solely on the biblical text—and it is not clear how much of this represents an early Iron Age reality and what part of this is a reflection of later Iron Age, or even post-Iron Age, realities and ideologies. To this one can add that the very assumption that one can define and relate to a singular “Israelite” identity, which defined the Philistines as the “other” in the early Iron Age, is far from certain (see now Ehrlich 2016 on the “fuzziness” of biblical gentiles).

With this in view, the recent suggestion that there was a Canaanite enclave in the Shephelah should be assessed. Various scholars (e.g., Jasmin 2006: 227–28; Bunimovitz and Lederman 2009; 2011; Na’aman 2010; Faust and Katz 2011; 2015; Faust 2013b; 2015c; Lederman and Bunimovitz 2014) believe that not only can one identify Philistine and Israelite/Judahite ethnicities, but they also believe that there is an additional “Canaanite” group in the Shephelah, located between the Philistines and Israelites.

For example, the excavators of Beth-Shemesh have identified a process of “resistance” among the local “non-Philistine” population at the site. They suggest that, with the arrival of the Philistine migrants, the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh stopped eating pork and ceased using decorated Philistine pottery in what they believe is an act of resistance (Bunimovitz and Lederman 2009; 2011; Lederman and Bunimovitz 2014). Although there may be some basis for these suggestions, several cautionary notes are in order. (a) Philistine decorated pottery has been found at Beth-Shemesh (e.g., Münnich 2013; as well as in the recent excavations [Lederman pers. comm.]); (b) The Philistines themselves were comprised of both foreign and local Canaanite components.

Attempts to formulate definitions of the various ethnic groups as living in clearly demarcated regions with unambiguous borders are even more difficult to accept (e.g., Na'aman 2010; Faust and Katz 2011; Faust 2013b; 2015a; 2015c; 2015d). The definition of “who is” and “who is not” a Philistine or an Israelite/Judahite is hardly agreed upon (see Maeir and Hitchcock 2016), and attempts to define the supposedly static ethnic identity of a group situated in the contact zone between these groups is problematic. Because “Canaanite” (local Levantine) features are seen in Iron Age Philistia, and much of the so-called “early Israelite” culture can be traced to local Levantine (“Canaanite”) origins, the existence of a third, unique “Canaanite” entity is problematic to posit.

Faust (2015c) has suggested that the relations between the Philistines and the Shephelah Canaanites reflects a colonial-like relationship. Accordingly, the Philistines, arriving in Canaan in the early Iron Age and forcibly occupying Philistia and destroying the Canaanite cities, were overlords of the Canaanites. He believes that, in the early Iron I, the Canaanites in the Shephelah did not use emblematic Philistine cultural items due to boundary definition. Later on, though, in the middle-to-late Iron I, the Canaanites, and in particular their elites, started to use certain classes of Philistine material culture, as a result of classic interaction between colonizer and colonized peoples.

This suggestion is likewise beset with problems. To start with, it seems to be based on an outmoded understanding of the processes involved in the initial stages of the development of the Philistine culture. Although traditional suggestions considered the appearance of the Philistine culture as the result of a clear-cut invasion of a foreign group (or groups), recent studies (e.g., Yasur-Landau 2010; Maeir and Hitchcock 2016; in press; Hitchcock and Maeir 2013; 2014; 2017; Cline 2014) reflect a very different picture. The Philistines are seen as a mixed, entangled socio-cultural entity deriving from various foreign and local Levantine groups. Likewise, the mechanisms through which the Philistine culture appeared are quite complex, including, inter alia, collapse of the Mediterranean Late Bronze Age “world order” and the appearance of pirate-like groups in the eastern Mediterranean (Hitchcock and Maeir 2014; 2017). To this one can add that there is very little evidence of substantial destruction at the Canaanite sites in the southern Coastal Plain, despite Faust’s (2015c: 215) claims to the contrary.

It should be stressed as well that there is very little evidence of warfare-related material in the Iron I Philistine culture—which belies a view of the Philistines as a conquering and dominating colonial culture. Although colonialism encompasses a very broad range of cultural interactions (see Gosden 2004; van Dommelen 2012), colonial relationships require, *condicio sine qua non*, domination by one party of the other (Horvarth 1972; Osterhammel 2005; Jordan 2009; Kohn 2011; Ypi 2013: 162; Steinmitz 2014: 79–80; Loomba 2015: 20)—and this may very well not be the case with the Philistines’ relations with neighboring cultures.

Clearly then, because it is not at all certain that the Philistines maintained a colonial dominance over the Shephelah; the conclusion that relations between the Philistines and the peoples of the Shephelah reflects a colonial situation rests on shaky ground.

A central issue on which this entire question hinges is how the ethnic identity of a population may be identified. Because this topic has been dealt with in regard to the “Canaanite enclave” in detail (Maeir and Hitchcock in press a), I will touch on it only briefly here.

The suggestion that an ethnic group may be defined on the basis of a list of archaeologically identified “markers,” which then can serve to define geographical boundaries (e.g., Bunimovitz and Faust 2001; Faust 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; Faust and Lev-Tov 2011, 2014; Faust and Katz 2011), often based on Barth’s (1969) seminal contribution to the study of ethnicity, needs to be carefully reviewed (Maeir and Hitchcock in press). Are not the very definitions of ethnic groups presumed to appear in Iron I an ideological reflection derived from later texts? Are we sure that there were distinct Philistine and Israelite ethnicities in the early Iron Age—or were there several groupings, some of them somewhat hard to define? And even if these groups did exist, are the suggested archaeological markers (such as pig consumption, pottery, etc.) in fact “boundary markers” for the different groups? As noted in previous studies (Maeir, Hitchcock, and Horowitz 2013; Maeir and Hitchcock in press), the appearance of some of these supposed markers in early Iron Age Philistia itself raises questions regarding the validity of simplistically using such markers.

The fluidity and rapidly changing nature of ethnic identity is well known (e.g., Hall 2000; Malkin 2001; Dougherty and Kurke 2003; Casella and Fowler 2005; Siapakas 2014). Conclusions regarding the identities of groups during the early Iron Age that are based, by and large, on written sources from later periods may reflect the social and/or ideological environment of these later periods, instead of the Iron Age. Thus, it is far from clear that distinct, archaeologically visible ethnic identities during the early Iron Age can be identified, when, in fact, a heterogeneous and constantly changing matrix of identities might have existed at the time.<sup>1</sup>

As previously suggested (Maeir and Hitchcock 2016), the identification of the “Canaanite enclave” might be influenced by modern reception of the biblical text, in particular the “Tamar and Judah narrative” in Genesis 38, in which the Canaanites are located in the Shephelah region. On the one hand, there is no textual corroboration of this in contemporaneous Iron Age texts. And on the other hand, very few biblical scholars would date Genesis 38 to the early Iron Age (e.g., Leuchter

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1. While Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg (2016: 173–86) at first appear to have a skeptical view of identifying ethnicities in the Iron Age Shephelah (and criticize the identification of a Canaanite entity in this region), in the end they opt for a somewhat essentialist interpretation, at least as concerns the identity of the inhabitants of Qeiyafa (as Judahites).

2013; in general, see Uehlinger 1999; 2000). Thus, it is far from clear that this text reflects a historical reality.

Although I fully accept the existence of what might be termed a Canaanite “identity” (or better, identities) during the Late Bronze Age, this does not mean that this identity continued into the Iron Age, a period when demographic, technological, and sociopolitical structures were in flux. This claim would require the assumption that the groups living in the border zone between the Coastal Plain and the Central Hills, where later sources located the Philistines on the one hand and Israelites/Judahites on the other, retained the cultural and ethnic identities they had during the Late Bronze Age. This, however, cannot be taken for granted. Identities can change quickly, and unless there is explicit evidence, there is no reason to assume that Late Bronze Age identity packages endured throughout such an extended period of social and cultural upheaval. Although there is some continuity in some aspects of the material culture between the Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, this does not mean that there was a continuity in Canaanite (or any other) group identity.

Nestor (2010; and see Eriksen [2010: 213–14] regarding other contexts) rightfully cautions against simplistic attempts to demonstrate explicit continuity between Israelite identity in Iron Age I and Iron Age II; and even more so, in the case of the Canaanite identity in the Shephelah during the early Iron Age, where we are completely dependent on scholarly assumptions, a cautious and skeptical approach is warranted. While the theoretical possibility of the existence of a “Canaanite identity” in the Shephelah cannot be denied, this is nothing more than a modern postulate!

Because both the Philistines and the Israelites/Judahites had substantial “Canaanite” components in their formative stages (Maeir and Hitchcock 2016), how can “Philistine Canaanites,” “Real Canaanites” (supposedly living in the Shephelah), and “Israelite Canaanites” be distinguished?

As already suggested (Maeir and Hitchcock 2016; in press), it would be preferable to look at the transitions between the Philistia and the Shephelah and the latter and the Central Hills as regions in which boundaries did exist but were “fuzzy” and constantly changing (Gardner 2007). There is no question that during the early Iron Age there were peoples who identified themselves distinctly—perhaps as “Philistines” (and they resided mainly in Philistia) and as Israelites/Judahites (and they resided mainly in the Central Hills); and for the argument’s sake, perhaps there were people who self-identified as “Canaanites” (residing in the Shephelah). Nonetheless, it would be very hard to determine on the basis of the archaeological evidence, at any given time, the cultural/ethnic affiliation of any specific group, let alone the exclusive, or even static, group identity of the inhabitants of a specific site in the border zones (see now Lehmann and Niemann 2014 and Mazar 2014: 362–64 for attempts to deal with the fluidity of cultural identities in the early Iron Age Shephelah).

What might have existed are overlapping “micro-identities” (see Whitmarsh 2010; Poblome, Malfitana, and Lund 2014), in which intensive cultural “code-switching” (following van Nijf 2010) occurred in the Iron I Shephelah, accompanied by regular switching between emblematic identifying facets, depending on specific contexts and needs. Similarly, perhaps identities in the Shephelah region were “nested identities,” in which identities (including, but not only, ethnicity) operated simultaneously at different levels.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there may have been overlapping identities in use simultaneously that were, over time, reflected in various ways in the archaeological record. The suggestion that changes in material culture and related differences directly reflect different ethnic identities is entirely too simplistic.

As previously suggested (Maier and Hitchcock 2016, in press; see now also Faust 2015c), viewing the Shephelah as a “Middle Ground” (White 1991; Woolf 2011; Reger 2014) or a “Third Space” (Bhabba 1994) may be insightful. In this perspective, the material culture “packages” identified in this region perhaps reflect the “Social Imaginaries” (Castoriadis 1975; Taylor 2002; Strauss 2006; Stavrianopoulou 2013) in a region that had intense intercultural contacts (see Mengoni 2010). These “social imaginaries” may also be reflected in later biblical sources mentioning the alleged cultural and ethnic makeup of the region; but this does not mean that these biblical images accurately reflect the complex sociocultural makeup and identity politics of this region during Iron I.

In summary, the suggestion that there was a “Canaanite enclave” in the early Iron Age Shephelah is far from proved. To continue to put forward this suggestion requires much more explicit archaeological evidence.

### The Status of Philistine Gath during the 10th–9th Centuries BCE

Recently, a debate has been raging as to the date when the Kingdom of Judah expanded westward into the Shephelah. On the one hand, some scholars posit that already in the 10th century BCE the Judahite Kingdom expanded into the Shephelah, to its northern, central, and southern regions (e.g., Faust 2013b; Tappy 2011; Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016; Lederman and Bunimovitz 2014; Hardin, Rollston, and Blakely 2014; etc.). Accordingly, this development reflects the growing political power of the Kingdom, and at the same time, the weakening of the Philistine cities—and their subjugation by the newly ascendant Judahite Kingdom.

On the other hand, various scholars have suggested (Koch 2012; Sergi 2013; Lehmann and Niemann 2014) that the Judahite Kingdom’s expansion westward, at least into the central Shephelah, did not occur until later, perhaps not until after the conquest of Gath by Hazael.

Without going into too much detail, I would like to reiterate the dominant role that Gath played in the region until its destruction by Hazael ca. 830 BCE. Not only

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2. On “nested identities” in general, see Herb and Kaplan 1999. For archaeological applications, see, e.g., Janusek 2005; Hakenbeck 2007; 2011; Roberts 2011; Salazar et al. 2014; Scopacasa 2014.

### Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath Archaeological Project

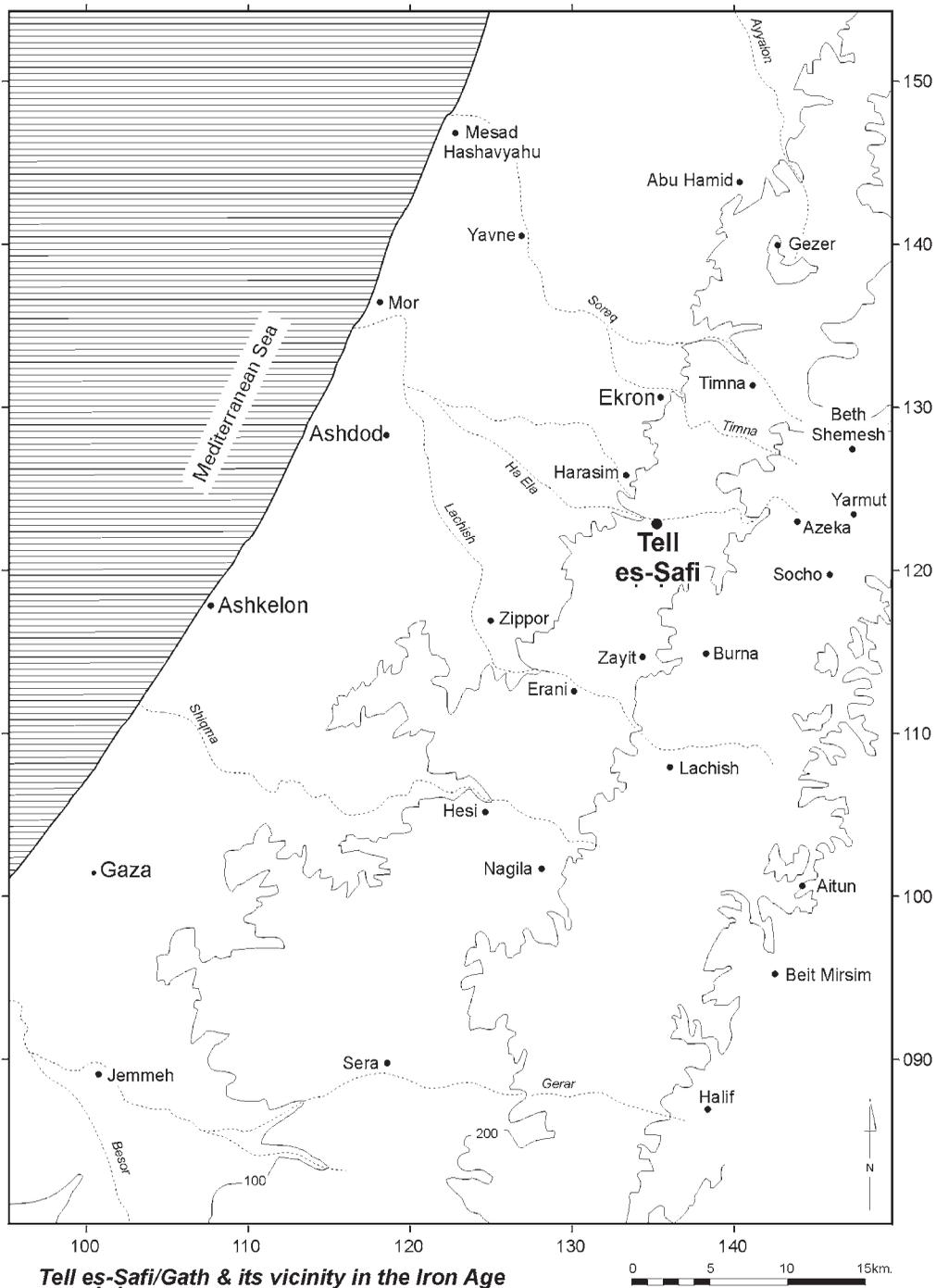


Fig. 1. Map of the Shephelah and Coastal Plain, with Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath and primary Iron Age sites.



Fig. 2. Aerial photograph (at the end of the 2016 season) of the fortifications and city gate of the lower city of Gath (north is at bottom of the picture).

is the city of Gath most probably the largest city in the southern Levant up until this destruction, there is now clear evidence (and on this see below in relation to the siege trench) that the entire city, including the extensive and impressively fortified lower city to the north (fig. 2). And to this one can add that, so far, with two decades of excavations at the site in the Iron Age layers, there is no evidence of a major destruction at the site from the early Iron Age until the destruction by Hazael and, similarly, there is no evidence of distinct, sudden changes in the material culture and its orientation. In other words, in light of the size, strength (extensive fortifications), and continuity exhibited at the site—and the very fact that it was perceived as a major target for conquest by Hazael—there can be little doubt that the Kingdom of Gath was the dominant polity in the central and northern part of the western Shephelah (and eastern Philistia) until the late 9th century BCE. Gath's strong presence would effectively block any attempt on the part of the nascent Judahite kingdom to expand westward. Gath's dominant status cannot be explained away, as Faust (2013b) attempted: it is impossible to claim that Gath should be seen as a unique case in Philistia, while other parts of Philistia were dominated by the Judahite Kingdom. One cannot simply sweep the major polity in the region under the carpet.



Fig. 3. Early Iron Age Cooking Jugs from Tell eš-Šafi/Gath.

Similarly, claims that Khirbet Qeiyafa should be seen as evidence of the expansion of the early Judahite Kingdom (Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016) should be put into proper perspective. While I do tend to accept that Khirbet Qeiyafa is a Judahite site, it is important to stress that the site was abandoned soon after its construction (Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016: 94–96).<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, a substantial reason must lie behind the abandonment of such a carefully constructed site; the omnipresent threat of the Kingdom of Gath just to the west can be seen as the most likely cause. Thus, while Khirbet Qeiyafa may very likely have been an attempt of the early Judahite polity to expand into the central and western Shephelah, this attempt seems to have been quickly curtailed by the dominant polity in the region—the Kingdom of Gath.

### Cultural Relationships between Gath and Judah

The influence of various cultures in the southern Levant on Philistine culture is well known. Although the timing and meaning of these influences are at times

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3. Although the excavators suggest that the Iron IIA phase of the site was abandoned, in light of the large quantity of objects found in this level, including smashed cultic objects, one can wonder whether this stratum ended in a destruction. In any case (abandonment or destruction), the chances are very good that the underlying causes behind the end of this phase were pressure from, if not direct conquest by, Gath.

debated (see various opinions noted above), it is quite clear that from its earliest, formative stages until the end of the Iron Age, there is evidence of regular Levantine influence on Philistine culture. On the other hand, influences in the other direction, from Philistia to surrounding Levantine cultures, has been of much less focus.

Over the years, various suggestions regarding Philistine linguistic influence on Israelite/Judahite culture, as seen in biblical and other textual materials, have been made (Rabin 1974). But very little has been said regarding influences as manifested in the material remains.

A vessel type that appears in early Iron Age Philistia, with clear parallels from the Aegean Late Helladic cultures, and which is often seen as a *fossil directeur* of early Philistine culture, is the “cooking jug.” This form subsequently appears in various late Iron I and Iron II cultures in the southern Levant (fig. 3). Several years ago (Ben-Shlomo et al. 2008), it was pointed out that the “cooking jug” may reflect certain food preparation techniques typical of the Philistine culture and these techniques may have been adopted, or appropriated, by other Levantine Iron Age cultures; when this adoption took place, other cultures incorporated the cooking jug into their pottery repertoire. Recently, Kisilevitz (2015: 166–68) published several figurines from an Iron IIA temple at Moza, near Jerusalem, which appear to share similarities to Philistine figurines in their decorations. This probably is additional evidence of Philistine influence on surrounding Levantine cultures and, in this case, in the cultic realm. Interestingly, to the list of bi-directional cultic influences between Philistia and Judah we can now add a jar, made in the region of Jerusalem, with what appears to be a Judahite inscription on it (Maier and Eshel 2014; fig. 4 here). The jar was found in the Iron Age IIA temple in the lower city of Gath, right next to the two-horned monolithic stone altar (fig. 5), which likewise shows a combination of local and nonlocal influences in Philistine cult (Maier 2012d).<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4. Iron IIA (9th century BCE) jar, made with clay from the Jerusalem region, with a Judahite inscription, found in the temple in the lower city of Gath.

4. The stone altar from Area D at Tell eš-Šafi/Gath (Maier 2012) will be published in detail in the future. In the meantime, it should be stressed that it is clear that this altar never had four stone horns—but only the two in the front. On the back of the altar, the original quarrying marks can still be seen, and there is no evidence on the back of the altar of two additional



Fig. 5. Monolithic stone altar from the Iron IIA (9th century BCE) lower city of Gath. Note the two horns at the front of the altar and clear signs that the back portion of the altar was never fully finished; there is absolutely no evidence that originally two additional horns had existed in the back and that subsequently they had been removed.

been discussed in various publications (Ackermann, Maeir, and Bruins 2004; Ackermann, Bruins, and Maeir 2005; Maeir 2009; 2012a; 2012c; Maeir and Gur-Arieh 2011); the detailed report is currently in press (Gur-Arieh and Maeir in press). This identification has been accepted by all, save for Ussishkin (2009; 2014; 2015), who has questioned whether this feature is in fact a siege system at all.<sup>5</sup> Because a

It appears that, at least until the 9th century BCE, and most likely in later phases of the Iron Age as well, ongoing bi-directional cultural influences existed between Philistia and Judah (and other regions in the Southern Levant as well). There is no reason to assume that the Philistine culture was not dominated, and did not become completely influenced by, Judean culture from the 10th century BCE onward (as Faust 2013b suggests). Not only did the Philistine material culture develop from Iron I into Iron IIA—with, among other features, continuity of Iron I symbolism (e.g., Maeir and Shai 2015)—but mutual influences between the two cultures continued without a doubt until the fall of Gath in the late 9th century BCE and very likely in later phases of the Iron Age as well.

### The Siege System at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath

The siege system at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath (fig. 6), which is dated to the Iron Age IIA and probably was constructed to attack the city by Hazael, the King of Aram Damascus, has

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horns, which fell off or were removed at some stage. Thus, Faust and Lev-Tov's (2014: 17 n. 32) and Nigro's (2014: 3 n. 9) suggestions that this was in fact, originally, a four-horned altar cannot be accepted.

5. Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg (2016: 112–13) have now joined Ussishkin in questioning the identification of this feature as a siege trench, but their arguments are rather unpersuasive. They ask: "Why would Hazael exhaust the strength of his forces by carrying out such an operation instead of attacking the city immediately upon arrival, or besieging it

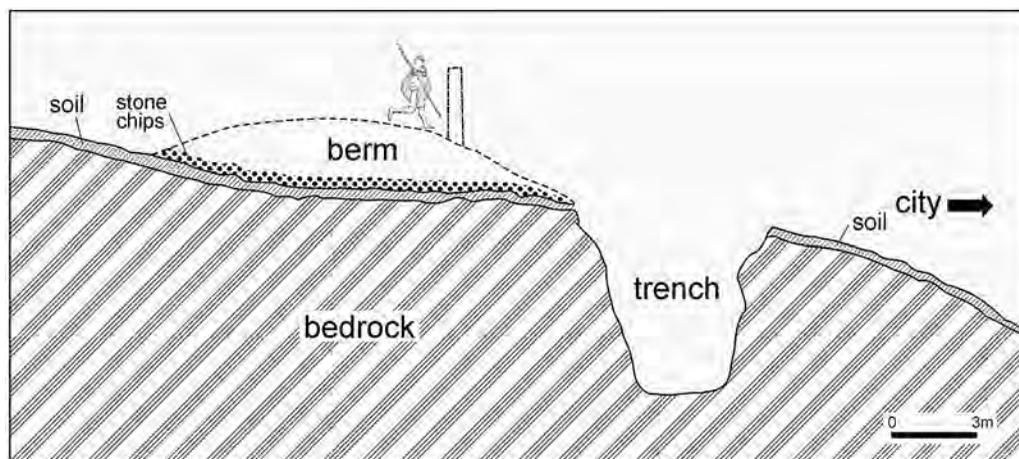


Fig. 6. Schematic section of elements of the Iron IIA (9th century BCE) siege system surrounding Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath (based on finds in Area C6).

detailed response to his 2009 article has already been published (Maier and Gur-Arieh 2011), I do not intend to go over all the arguments for its identification as a siege system. Instead, in light of Ussishkin's most recent views on the issue (2014;

by other means? How did these warriors support themselves during the long march back and forth and during the protracted siege" (ibid.). These questions are somewhat surprising, because any familiarity with ancient siege warfare (as for example explained in Maier and Gur-Arieh 2011), would have made it clear that, despite these questions, time and again ancient armies besieged sites for extended periods and expended the effort to construct extensive and labor-intensive siege systems, when other methods of attacking the site were not viable. The reservations they raise regarding the identification of this installation as a siege system and its attribution to an Aramean conquest of Gath are similarly unconvincing. Several details can be cited: (1) They question the very identification of Tell eṣ-Ṣafi as Gath, without providing any compelling argument for this (Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016), despite the fact that this identification is certain (see Schniedewind 1998; Maier 2012b). (2) They suggest that Gath was destroyed by another Philistine city-state (Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016: 113), once again without providing any support. (3) Furthermore, the interpretation of the brief mention of the conquest of Gath by Hazael that they prefer, particularly when compared to their positivistic and simplistic analysis of large sections of the biblical text in relation to the early Judahite monarchy, is difficult to accept. This lack of reference to and failure to utilize large swaths of up-to-date textual analyses and interpretive approaches to the biblical text seems to fit well with their methodological approach. They seem to ignore previous research on a topic when suggesting their own interpretations of the same topic (Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016:113)! (4) And, finally, it should be noted that they ignore what they themselves (Garfinkel, Kreimerman, and Zilberg 2016: 186) argue for—namely, an "Occam's Razor" approach to interpreting archaeological evidence: identifying Hazael as the agent behind the destruction of Gath is the simplest solution in comparison to all other possibilities that have been suggested (see Maier 2012a: 43–49).



Fig. 7. View of a portion of the siege system surrounding Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath, to the south of the site. The clearly visible berm (1) situated to the south of the trench (2) (on the side away from the city of Gath). Note the location of one of the besiegers' towers (3), inserted into the berm.

2015), I will point out some of the weaknesses in the latest arguments against this interpretation.

(a) Ussishkin (2014; 2015) attempts to disconnect the trench from the suggestion that it had a siege function and returns to Eph'al's (1996: 77; 2008: 81 n. 143) suggestion that the *hrz* mentioned in the Zakur inscription does not refer to a trench but to tunneling activity carried out by Bir-Hadad, the son of Hazael during his siege of Hadrach. Unfortunately, he does not consider the detailed discussion of Eph'al's suggestion, and the refutation of it, which we have published (Maeir 2009; Maeir and Gur-Arieh 2011), which makes his argument largely irrelevant.

(b) Ussishkin (2014; 2015) does not believe that there was a northern side to the trench and does not accept our very logical suggestion that the river bed of the Elah Valley, which runs just to the north of the site served as such. Ussishkin (2014; 2015) states that, because the river bed runs just to the north of Area D, it could be easily crossed by inhabitants of Gath and would not have served as a substantial obstacle. Once again, this does not take into account several factors, most of which I have already published. (1) It has been clearly demonstrated, using remote sensing, that the trench goes far to the north toward the Elah Valley riverbed, and there cannot be any explanation for this unless the trench was intended to connect with the riverbed, thus forming the northern side of the siege barrier. (2) The riverbed, as well as the surrounding landscape, was substantially deeper in antiquity than today (Ackermann et al. 2014), and the riverbed would have been a substantial

topographical obstacle, not to mention that in antiquity, the river itself may have been perpetual rather than seasonal (Ackermann, pers. comm.) (3) Ussishkin (2014; 2015) assumes that substantial portions of the city were unfortified. This simply is not the case. Evidence of fortifications of the upper tell are now evident in Area F. Although the site was founded in the Early Bronze, the city wall continued to be used in the Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Iron I, and Iron II. More importantly, the recent excavation at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath (as of summer 2016) has now demonstrated, beyond doubt, that a large-scale fortification, probably including a gate, surrounded and fortified the lower city as well (fig. 2). Even though evidence of this was seen on the surface prior to excavations, this area and this feature have now been excavated and clearly dated to the Iron Age I and IIA. (4) Ussishkin's belief (2014: 10) that there is no evidence of a berm on the southern side of the site, as he claims in his interpretation of the photograph that he published (2014: fig. 4), is simply incorrect. Although the berm is not fully preserved on the southern side of the trench, several clear sections of the berm have been preserved (see fig. 7). In fact, one can even see evidence of the berm in the picture that Ussishkin presented.<sup>6</sup> (5) Finally, I am a firm believer in the principal of "Occam's Razor" when it comes to the interpretation of archaeological remains. Ussishkin (2014: 11) admits that he has no alternative explanation for the trench but still prefers not to identify it as a siege system. Since I believe that convincing arguments and evidence to identify this feature as a siege system have been presented, and even though a sign identifying it as such has yet to be found, the available evidence lends strong support to our suggestion.

### Summary

The issues covered in this overview represent a selection of the issues relating to the study of the Iron Age Shephelah, Philistine culture, and other associated matters that have emerged from the first twenty years of excavation at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath. As the excavations continue, and more finds are revealed and analyzed and placed within their wider context, additional insights and reassessments of our understanding on these and related issues will no doubt emerge.

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6. As noted, a detailed study of the siege system will appear in the near future (Gur-Arieh and Maeir in press). An explanation of the geomorphological features connected with the trench and berm, including evidence for these features in various locations around the site, has appeared in previous publications (Ackermann, Maeir, and Bruins 2004; Ackermann, Bruins, and Maeir 2005).

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