

The Other “Philistines”

Ephraim Stern

THE BIBLE PORTRAYS THE PHILISTINES AS Israel's cruel and ruthless enemy. The two peoples engaged in a fierce struggle for control of the land in the 12th–11th centuries B.C.E. We all know the stories of Samson's struggles against the Philistines (Judges 14–16), David's victory over the Philistine giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17), and the tragic death of King Saul and his son Jonathan in a battle with the Philistines at Mt. Gilboa (1 Samuel 31).

The Philistines were only one of several tribes known as the Sea Peoples, however, who invaded the Land of Israel during the 12th century B.C.E. It has recently become clear that these Sea Peoples conquered not only parts of the Land of Israel but virtually the entire eastern Mediterranean coastal region, including northern Syria and southern Anatolia. Their attempt to conquer Egypt failed.

In the Land of Israel the Philistines established five large and prosperous cities, all located in the southern coastal plain: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron. These cities are often referred to as the Philistine

Pentapolis. They have all been extensively excavated, except Gaza because its tell is covered by modern buildings. These excavations, together with others nearby, reveal a material culture that is both rich and unique, reflecting its origins in Greece and Cyprus.

The Philistines lived in the Land of Israel for more than 600 years.

But, as I noted, the Philistines were just one of the Sea Peoples. The larger category of Sea Peoples is not known to us as such from the Bible. We know of



THE PHILISTINES, who established five prosperous cities—the Pentapolis—on the southern coast of the Land of Israel, were just one tribe of Sea Peoples. This monochrome strainer-spout jug (right) helped author Ephraim Stern distinguish between the pottery of the southern Philistines and the northern Sea Peoples. This jug is from the northern Sea Peoples' site of Dor. Although it is decorated with motifs similar to Philistine bichrome pottery, this jug is painted in only one color—red. Monochrome pottery, Stern discovered, differentiates northern from southern Sea Peoples' vessels.



Sea Peoples generally from other sources, especially archaeology. We may refer to the northern Sea Peoples to distinguish them from the Philistines in the south. From other ancient sources, we even know some of the names of other Sea Peoples—Sikils, Sherden, Danunu, Weshesh. The Bible seems to refer to *all of them* as Philistines.

We know about some of these northern Sea Peoples from Egyptian sources. Although the Sea Peoples were able to conquer and settle all over the eastern Mediterranean, the Egyptians were successful in repelling them. Famous sculpted reliefs at Medinet Habu from the time of Pharaoh Ramesses III (1180 B.C.E.) (his predecessor Ramesses II is sometimes



SCULPTED RELIEFS at the Egyptian site of Medinet Habu (top; see drawing, bottom) depict Egyptians in a sea battle with three different Sea Peoples—the Danunu, the Sikils and the Philistines.

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YISAEI YADIN, THE ART OF WARFARE IN BIBLICAL LANDS (NEW YORK: MCGRAW-HILL, 1963)

referred to as the Pharaoh of the Exodus) shows the Egyptians destroying three of the Sea Peoples—the Danunu, the Sikils and the Philistines.

A cuneiform text from Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast of Syria refers to one of the northern Sea Peoples: Sikils are here described as pirates living on ships.

Much of what we know about these Sea Peoples comes from two other Egyptian documents. The first is the Onomasticon of Amenope, dated to the end of the 12th or beginning of the 11th century B.C.E. It refers not only to places like Ashkelon, Ashdod and Gaza, but also to peoples like the Philistines, Sikils and Sherden. From their place in these lists, it seems that the Sikils and the Sherden controlled the central and northern coasts of Canaan.

A more detailed Egyptian source is the *Story of Wenamun*, which describes Wenamun's journey from Egypt to Canaan in the first half of the 11th century B.C.E. Wenamun, a priest of the temple of Amon at Karnak, was sent to purchase Lebanese cedar trees for the construction of funeral boats. According to Wenamun, the Sikils were the rulers of Dor, from which they sailed a large commercial and military fleet that anchored in the Dor harbor. Much of the additional material for this article comes from the Dor excavations that I directed for more than two decades (1980–2000).

The *Story of Wenamun* gives us a unique picture of several prosperous autonomous towns the length of the Canaan/Phoenician coast. Some were ruled by Sea Peoples, others by the Phoenicians. These port cities maintained extensive trade relations with one another and apparently maintained control over these shores without Egyptian interference.

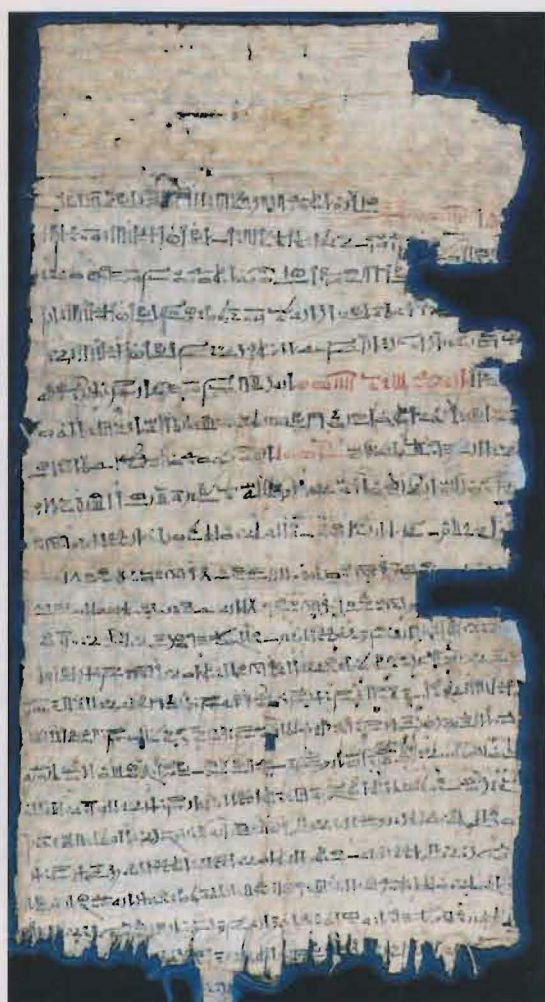
The Bible, as we noted, apparently refers to all of the various Sea Peoples as "Philistines." Thus King Saul waged war against the "Philistines" in the northern part of the country, the area inhabited by the northern Sea Peoples. The Book of Samuel tells us: "The Philistines mustered and marched to Shunem and encamped; and Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa" (1 Samuel 28:4).

These sites are in the Jezreel Valley, in the north, hundreds of miles from the Philistine Pentapolis in the south.

Saul also fought "the Philistines" on Mt. Gilboa, another site in the north (1 Samuel 31), where "the Philistines" hung the bodies of Saul and his three sons.

For the Biblical author, they were all Philistines.

This article will focus on the northern Sea Peoples in the Land of Israel (or Canaan). We should



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THE STORY OF WENAMUN describes an Egyptian priest's journey to the Canaan/Phoenician coast to purchase Lebanese cedar trees in the 11th century B.C.E. The account includes a reference to the Sikil settlement at Dor, which is described as a harbor city with a large fleet. Archaeology vastly expands our knowledge of this Sikil city. The Sikils are one of the northern Sea Peoples, as distinguished from the Philistine Pentapolis mentioned in the Bible.

also note, however, that recently new finds and inscriptions attest to an extremely large kingdom of Sea Peoples even farther north—in northern Syria and southern Anatolia,¹ beyond the sphere of Canaan and Phoenicia.

North of the Pentapolis cities, Sea Peoples' occupation has been uncovered at five significant sites—Aphek, Tell Qasile, Tell Gerisa, Jaffa and Dor, of which Dor was the largest. Dor was also the only northern Sea Peoples' settlement that, according to the Wenamun papyrus, was ruled by a king. The particular Sea Peoples here are identified as Sikil. Based on the archaeological evidence, the Sikil



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DOR, THE LARGEST of five Sea Peoples' sites uncovered in northern Israel, boasted a particularly strong defense wall (above) and engaged in industrial activities, as evidenced by thick accumulations of bronze industrial ash (left) and vessels and other implements (right).

settlement at Dor was five times greater than that of the preceding Canaanite city.

All of the previous Canaanite settlements of the Sharon and Carmel coasts were destroyed at the end of the Late Bronze Age; most excavators attribute this destruction to the Sea Peoples. The Sikil city of Dor was surrounded by a strong defensive wall. Several metallurgical installations were also found there.

Among the more intriguing Sikil finds at Dor was a bench-like structure with a series of depressions alongside one another. We were puzzled until we located a Boeotian clay model of an Aegean-type communal dough-kneading table with women behind the depressions kneading the dough and a supervisor at the end (see p. 36).

Other finds were typical of well-known Philistine examples: anthropomorphic juglets, bull-shaped libation vessels, ivories decorated with a bull goring a flower, a rhyton in the form of a

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Biblical Philistines in the North and South

As these Biblical quotations (NRSV) illustrate, the Bible refers to the Sea Peoples in the north as well as the south as Philistines:

Judges 15:9–16

Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah, and made a raid on Lehi. The men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" They said, "We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us." Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then have you done to us?" He replied, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." They said to him, "We have come down to bind you, so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines." Samson answered them, "Swear to me that you yourselves will not attack me." They said to him, "No, we will only bind you and give you into their hands; we will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock.

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines

came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the Lord rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down and took it, and with it he killed a thousand men. And Samson said,

"With the jawbone of a donkey,
heaps upon heaps,
with the jawbone of a donkey
I have slain a thousand men."

1 Samuel 17:4–7, 48–49

And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. [...] When the

Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

1 Samuel 31:8–13

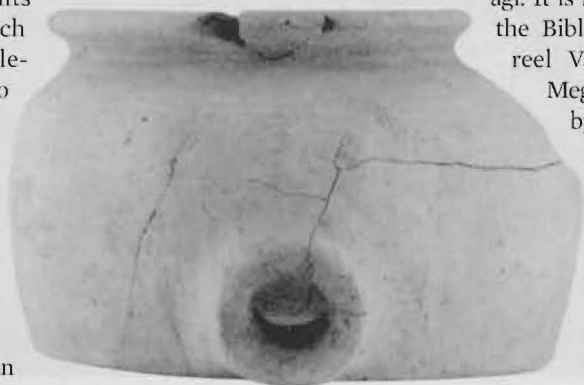
When the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head, stripped off his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the houses of their idols and to the people. They put his armor in the temple of Astarte; and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men set out, traveled all night long, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. They came to Jabesh and burned them there. Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

lioness, jewelry depicting bulls and cow scapulae incised with grooves (see p. 37). All of this has Aegean and Cypriot cultural origins. The cow scapulae with grooves are puzzling. They have been found at a number of Sea Peoples' sites. They were probably used to divine a message from a god. Others have suggested that the grooves were made to produce a musical sound when the bone was waved in the air.

Farther north in the Acco Valley, archaeological surveys have identified a number of Late Bronze Age Canaanite settlements that were entirely destroyed. The settlements that were renewed were much smaller. The largest settlement—at the end of the Acco Valley, on the Mediterranean coast—was Acco itself. According to excavator Moshe Dothan, after the demise of the Late Bronze Age Canaanite city, a new population arrived with a new style of pottery, again reflecting Cypriot and Aegean

influences. Dothan attributed these vessels to the Sherden, another tribe of the northern Sea Peoples.

East of Dor, overlooking the Jezreel Valley, lies the mighty site of Megiddo that has been subject to more archaeological excavations than any site in Israel, with the possible exception of Jerusalem. Megiddo appears to have served as a regional center of the Sea Peoples, as evidenced by the finds in Stratum VI, dating to the 11th century B.C.E. These finds comprise all of the elements of Philistine (or, more accurately, Sea Peoples') culture: pottery assemblages, cultic artifacts, weapons and sarcophagi. It is hardly surprising that the Bible identifies the Jezreel Valley, dominated by Megiddo but surrounded by numerous smaller Sea Peoples' settlements (Yokne'am, Tel Qiri, Tel Qashish, Afula and others), as the military center of the "Philistine" armies that went to battle





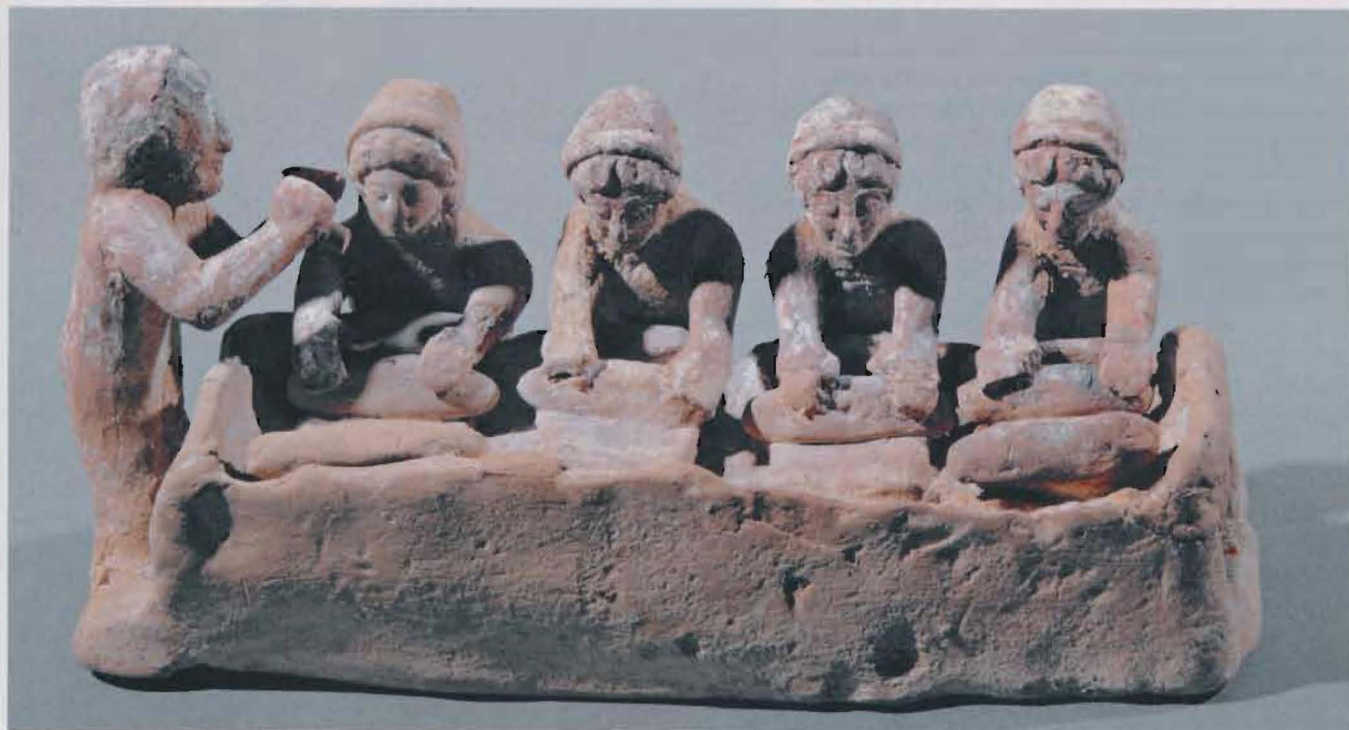
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against King Saul (1 Samuel 28:4; 29:11). This stratum of the Megiddo tell (Stratum VI) was extremely rich in finds because it was thoroughly destroyed; the succeeding stratum in time (Stratum V) contains remains clearly associated with the Israelite kingdom.

The major way archaeologists identify Philistine/Sea Peoples', as well as other, cultures is by pottery styles, which can be pretty dull, especially to outsiders. This is less true of Philistine/Sea Peoples' pottery because it is often decorated. A complete vessel discovered at Dor (see p. 31) is important in my own history of research. At the northern Sea Peoples' site of Afula, a similar jug was found, about which Trude Dothan, the doyenne of Philistine archaeology, remarked that its "shape and decoration cannot be readily classified with any of the phases and styles of Philistine pottery, although it belongs to the monochrome variant of Philistine pottery."² It was this that first got me thinking about the similarities and differences between the northern and southern Sea Peoples' pottery assemblages.

Both the northern and southern Sea Peoples' pottery assemblages draw from the Aegean and

NEED TO KNEAD. A bench-like installation with a row of depressions was discovered at Dor (left), which Stern believes may have been a table for grinding or preparing dough, as depicted in a Boeotian clay model of an Aegean-type communal dough-kneading table (below) from the sixth century B.C.E.



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Cypriot repertoires, where we find clear parallels, especially decoration with parallel stripes. In both north and south the pottery is decorated with preening birds and other similar motifs—triangles, rhomboids, spirals, stripes and checkerboard patterns. Horn-shaped vessels is another common feature of north and south.

But there are also differences between the pottery of the southern (Philistine) and northern Sea Peoples. Most significantly, in the south the pottery developed a bichrome phase. In the north there is but a single monochrome phase (see p. 31). Moreover, in the south the Philistine wares display pseudo-Egyptian motifs such as schematic lotus flower patterns. These are entirely absent in the

CULT OBJECTS from Dor displaying Aegean and Cypriot origins are typical of Philistine material culture. Anthropomorphic juglets, such as the one depicting a human male figure with coffee bean-shaped eyes from Dor (top left), appear to be unique to the northern Sea Peoples. A bull featured on a gold earring from Dor (top right) was likely produced in Cyprus or at a Philistine site. A cow scapula, or shoulder blade, with incised grooves from Dor (bottom) has also been found at a number of other Sea Peoples' sites and probably originated in Cyprus. Its purpose is unknown.

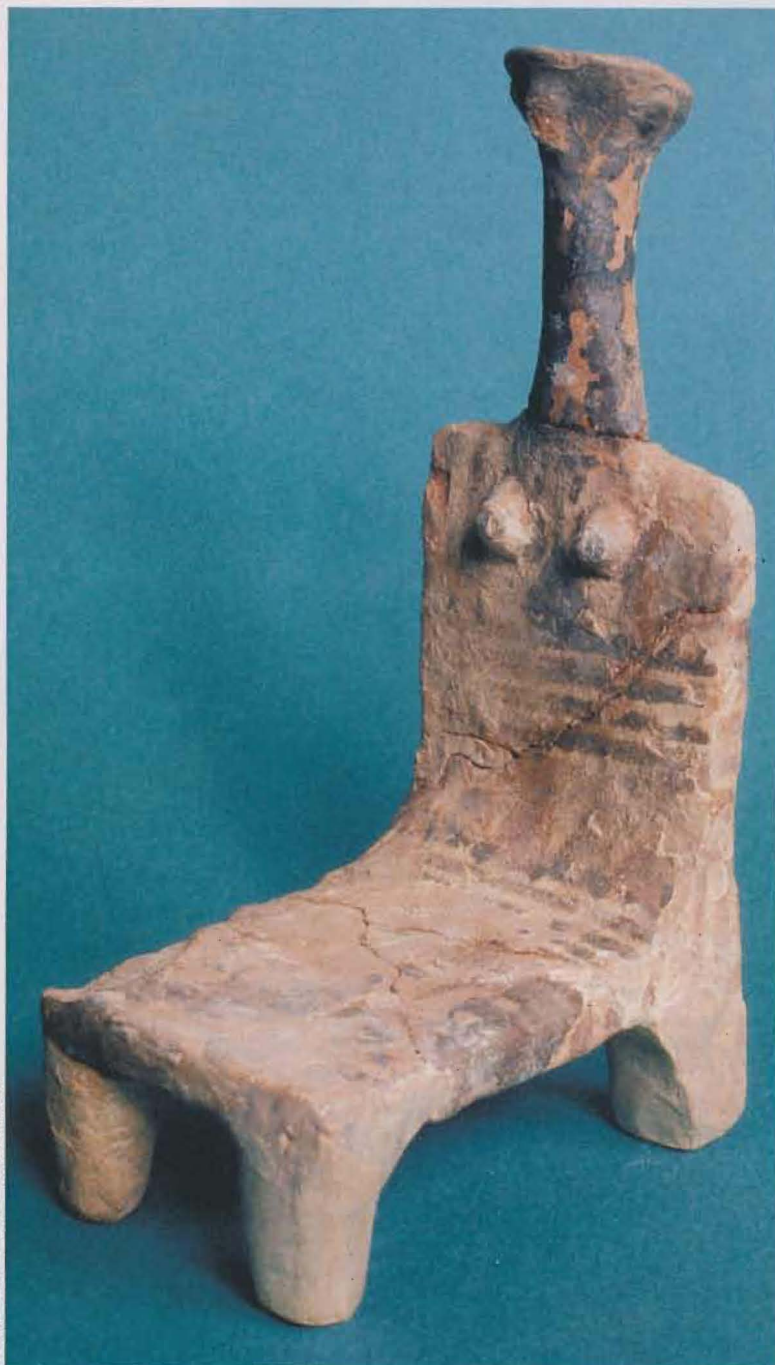
northern repertoire, which rarely includes motifs such as fish or animals.

Anthropomorphic vessels also appear to be unique to the northern Sea Peoples—for example,

juglets with a handle attached to the head of the human figure (see p. 37). Israeli archaeologist Amihai Mazar described the characteristic eyes on these figures as "coffee-bean eyes."

The "Ashdoda" figurine made famous by the

PECULIAR AND MYSTERIOUS. The Ashdoda figurine—named for this beautiful example from Ashdod—is commonly found at Philistine sites in the south, but not at Sea Peoples' sites in the north.



fetching example excavated by Moshe Dothan at Ashdod is a common find in the south. They have been excavated in large numbers in all of the Philistine settlements in the south. A few have also been found as we move north at Aphek and Tel Qasile, mixed settlements on the banks of the Yarkon River. But not a single Ashdoda has been found further north.

Slowly we can identify similarities between the cultures of the northern and southern Sea Peoples, as well as their differences.

One small, unimpressive artifact that distinguishes between southern and northern Sea Peoples is loom weights. Hundreds of these loom weights have been recovered from Sea Peoples' sites in the north and south. They are of two types, however. In the south, in Philistia proper, they are

HORN-SHAPED VESSELS like this are common to both the northern Sea Peoples and the southern Philistines.



tall, narrow cylindrical lumps of clay with an even narrower waist in the middle. Beginning at the border area of the northern Sea Peoples we find an entirely different kind of loom weight. It is rounded and flat with a hole at the center. The inspiration for almost all other cultural-specific objects of the Sea Peoples—not only pottery and cultic vessels and objects such as the Ashdodas, but also architecture, metallurgy, burial objects—find their inspiration in Cyprus and the west.

One especially telling (and peculiar) object is the so-called "mouth-guard"—metal strips, usually of gold or other precious metal that was placed over the mouth of the deceased before burial. This custom has deep roots in Mycenae and the Aegean sphere, the purpose of which is, alas, unknown. These mouth guards have been found at southern as well as northern Sea Peoples' sites.

The Bible attributes to the Philistines the introduction of metal into the Land of Israel (1 Samuel 13:19–22). Evidence of an advanced metallurgical industry—bronze as well as iron—has been found both in Philistia in the south and at such northern Sea Peoples' sites as Dor, Megiddo and Acco. Many of these bronze implements are for everyday use, such as knives and plowshares. Other bronze implements were clearly *not* for everyday use, such as spearheads and battle axes. Sea Peoples' javelin heads found at several northern sites have an elongated blade and tang with very close parallels in Aegean and Cypriot forms.

Another metal instrument that has been found at northern as well as southern Sea Peoples' sites is a knife that looks like a dagger, but is probably for slaughtering sacrifices. Five examples have been found in Philistine temples at the Pentapolis site of Ekron. Other examples have been found associated with the temple at Qasile and, further north, at Dor and Megiddo. These unique slaughtering knives have a bone handle in the shape of a large rounded button on the end. Again, the cultural source of the implement is Cyprus, although manufactured at Sea Peoples' sites in the Land of Israel.

Research into the Sea Peoples is vast and expanding. This article is simply an introduction. There are other aspects of their culture that are left untouched here—jewelry, architecture and inscriptions, for example. Farther north—in Lebanon and Syria, for example—we find further evidence of Sea Peoples' rule. On the other hand, the marvelous anthropoid coffins that were found in the south near the border of Philistia and Egypt display intriguing faces that seem to be a combination of Philistine and Egyptian features are now considered Egyptian, not Philistine, as they



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COURTESY LEON LEVY EXPEDITION TO ASHKELOH

LOOM WEIGHTS also distinguish the material culture of northern Sea Peoples from those of the south. In the north, the loom weights are round and flat with a hole in the center (top). In the south, loom weights are tall and cylindrical with a pinched waist (bottom).

once were. As I say, the subject is a complicated and expanding one that we are only beginning to understand in detail.

There is one final but important distinction between the northern and southern Sea Peoples' cultures: The northern Sea Peoples' culture lasted only about a hundred years (from the end of the 12th to the end of the 11th century B.C.E.). Their settlements began with their conquest of this area at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Excavations



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MAKING METAL. Bronze and iron have been found in both northern and southern Sea Peoples' sites. Bronze implements were made for everyday use as well as for weaponry, such as this shafted spear head (above, top) and ax/adze (above, bottom) from Megiddo. Ivory knife handles attached to a metal blade, such as this one from Ekron (left), have been recovered from both northern and southern Sea Peoples' sites.

In the south, in Philistia, the situation was quite different. There the Philistines, as represented by their Pentapolis cities, continued to thrive and threaten Israel for 600 years. Their demise at the end of this time had nothing to do with Israel. It was Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian monarch who destroyed the Jerusalem Temple—the so-called First Temple—and exiled the Jerusalemites to Babylonia, who two decades earlier destroyed the Philistine cities, similarly exiling its people.*

But here there is a major divergence. After about 49 years Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland—and they did. Their civilization never ended. In contrast to the Jews, the Philistines never returned. They simply disappeared from history. The Greeks and later the Romans preserved the Philistine name, however, in referring to the land as Palestine—a name that remains in use to this day. 📌

have confirmed that all of the Canaanite settlements in this area were destroyed at this time. Except for a few sites (like Qasile) that were built on virgin ground, the other northern Sea Peoples' sites were built on the ruins of earlier Canaanite cities. Nearly all the excavators attribute the construction of these new cities to the Sea Peoples.

A century after the northern Sea Peoples' conquest, their settlements were totally destroyed and replaced by the material culture of the kingdom of Israel.

¹ Brian Janeway, "The Nature and Extent of Aegean Contact at Tell Ta'yinat and Vicinity in the Early Iron Age: Evidence of the Sea Peoples?" *Scripta Mediterranea*, vol. XXVII–XXVIII (2006–2007), pp. 123–146; Itamar Singer, "The Philistines in the North and the Kingdom of Taita" in Gershon Galil et al., eds., *The Ancient Near East in the 12th–10th Century BCE—Culture and History. Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Haifa at the University of Haifa, 2–5 May 2010*, Alter Orient und Altes Testament Band 392 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), pp. 451–471.

² Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and Their Material Culture* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1982), p. 81.

*See Lawrence E. Stager, "The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction," *BAR*, January/February 1996, and Daniel M. Master and Lawrence E. Stager, "Buy Low, Sell High: The Marketplace at Ashkelon," *BAR*, January/February 2014.