

The Development Process of Philistine Material Culture: Assimilation, Acculturation and Everything in between

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The process of change in Philistine material culture during the Iron Age has variously been described as assimilation, acculturation or creolization. It is suggested here that the changes that occur in Philistine material culture are a direct result of the merger of the immigrant and indigenous populations in Philistia throughout the Iron Age I. During the Iron Age II, this material culture is basically static, and does not exhibit any major changes. This interpretation is contrary to the acculturation model currently used by most scholars, which suggests a more continuous change throughout the Iron Age.

Introduction

The unique attributes of Philistine culture in the Iron Age I have attracted scholarly attention to the material culture of this group. Although this culture has been widely studied for several decades (e.g., T. Dothan 1982), the existence of a Philistine material culture that continued to exist until the Neo-Babylonian conquest has only relatively recently been acknowledged (e.g., Stone 1995; Gitin 1998). The development of this material culture was defined as a process of acculturation, with the interaction between the Philistines and other groups resulting in changes in the original culture, while the group continued to exist as a separate entity (e.g., Stone 1995; Gitin 2000; Maeir 2001). The growing information available for the study of the Philistines and the region in which they settled has shed new light on the course of events that involved the Philistines and the subsequent changes to their culture (e.g., T. Dothan 1982; Bunimovitz 1990; Stone 1995; Gitin 1998; 2000; Maeir 2001; forthcoming). In reviewing the currently available evidence, it seems that the acculturation model which is widely accepted today is inadequate for explaining the changes that occurred in the Philistine material culture throughout their existence.

While the definition of acculturation is broad (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovitz 1935, 229–230), allowing for its application in many cases, the way it has thus far been used as a model for the changes in Philistine culture (e.g., Stone 1995) no longer seems appropriate. The “snapshots” Stone (1995) uses

only reflect the very beginning and end of Philistine culture in Canaan. Using “snapshots” from throughout the Iron Age suggests that the trajectory of change is quite different, with a drastic change in the pace of change around the onset of the Iron Age II. While the acculturation model on the whole does not require a direct correlation with time or distance (e.g., Pires and Stanton 2000, 51), its application to Philistine culture suggests a steady change throughout the Iron Age, which is not the case. However, the significant changes almost all occur in the Iron Age I, and Philistine material culture is relatively static in the Iron Age II, as is natural in any culture (e.g., Rosenberg 1994, 333).

Another major problem with the acculturation model is that it underestimates the importance of the changes in a culture. The assumption that an existing culture would abandon its own beliefs for those of surrounding cultures is too simplistic. Discarding practices learnt over generations is not undertaken lightly (e.g., Petrequin 1993). There must have been good reason for the Philistines to adopt Canaanite practices. In order to make sense of such changes in culture, the social context in which they took place must justify the changes; the adoption of foreign practices should be viewed as determined actions, with a habitual basis and reflecting future intent (Shanks and Tilley 1992, 124). Cultures do not randomly adopt other cultural elements, but rather select from among other behaviour that which best fits their needs and objectives (Durham 1976). Cultural selection is determined by the pre-existing culture, i.e., a culture will adopt elements that fit

well with the original culture (Rosenberg 1994, 321). Given the above, an alternative to the acculturation model should be sought to describe Philistine cultural changes.

Here it is suggested that what happened to the Philistines in the Iron I is a result of the cultural merging and synchronization between the new immigrant Philistine population and the local Canaanite inhabitants of the region. The difference between this cultural merging and acculturation is that it stresses the changes as an internal merger of two different cultures (Canaanite and Philistine) into a single culture (which may be called Canaan-Philistine [Gadot 2003, 255] or even Neo-Philistine). The changes in Philistine material culture during the Iron Age II are best explained as a development resulting from changes in style and preference that are apparent in all cultures over time. Prior to the theoretical discussion, various aspects of Philistine material culture are reviewed, and an attempt is made to redefine the events that occurred in Philistia during the Iron Age.

Philistine Cultural Changes in the Iron Age – Relevant Data

Population and Demographic Changes in the Iron Age

The origins of the Philistines in Canaan has been widely debated, with some scholars arguing for a homeland in the Aegean or southeastern Europe (e.g., T. Dothan 1995; Stager 1995; Killebrew 1998; Sweeney and Yassur-Landau 1999; Barako 2000; Ben-Shlomo, Shai and Maier 2004; T. Dothan and Zukerman 2004), and others contesting the very immigration of any such group (e.g., Muhly 1992; Sherratt 1998; Drews 2000). The various findings from Philistia, including the pottery, unique architectural features, dietary habits and other aspects of material culture that are foreign to the Southern Levant, together with the historical record documenting the events of the early Iron Age, strongly argue for the migration of the Philistines particularly, if not exclusively, from the Aegean (Barako 2000; for the heterogeneity of this group see Brug 1985; Harrison 1988). The source of the homeland of the Philistines is, however, of little importance to the arguments presented here. It is sufficed to say for this discussion that the initial appearance of the Philistine material culture includes elements that are foreign to the traditions of Late Bronze Age Canaan.

Among the scholars who accept the immigration theory, some have suggested that the local

Canaanite population was displaced/annihilated by the newcomers (e.g., Stager 1995; Stone 1995), while others propose that the immigrants settled alongside the indigenous population (e.g., Finkelstein 1995; 2000; Sharon 2001; Yassur-Landau 2002, 243). Although the exact size of the incoming group in relation to that of the indigenous population is arguable (for the problems involved in estimating population size, see Zorn 1994), the continuity of the Canaanite settlements and material culture suggests that the immigrant group did settle alongside and were considerably smaller in number than the indigenous population. Finkelstein (2000, 168) has demonstrated the continuity of occupation in the region in settled sites, pointing out that eighty percent of the Iron I sites were already inhabited in the Late Bronze Age. Sweeney and Yassur-Landau (1999, 138) have noted the presence of Canaanite women and children among the Philistines in the early stages after their arrival, as depicted in the Medinet Habu reliefs and indicated by the excavated assemblages that include both Canaanite and Aegean wares and loomweights. Killebrew (1999, 95) has already shown that cooking ware preference is particularly significant, since Canaanite cooking pots and Aegean cooking jugs represent the different dietary habits of these two distinct ethnic groups. The continuity from the Late Bronze Age is also evident in the assemblages containing both Late Bronze Age pottery and Mycenaean III C:1 ware, for example, from Ashdod Stratum XIII, although the quantitative relationship between the two is not available (M. Dothan and Porath 1993; Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2001; 2004; Ben-Shlomo 2003). Of particular relevance is the continued use of the Semitic names of all five of the Philistine Pentapolis cities, indicating the presence of Canaanites in these cities (Yassur-Landau 2002, 243).

Hearths

Hearths have been excavated in Iron I building complexes at Tel Miqne-Ekron and Tell Qasile. Both freestanding hearths of various shapes and round hearths have clear Aegean affinities, based on their presence in temples and public buildings at sites throughout Cyprus and the Aegean, such as Pylos, Mycenae, Enkomi and Tiryns (T. Dothan 1995, 4). The importance of the hearth in the original tradition of the Philistines is demonstrated by the continuation of this feature through the various phases of the Philistine city of Ekron (T. Dothan 1998). Even prior to the discovery of hearths at Philistine sites, the name “Philistine” had been linked to the Indo-European goddess of the hearth

(A. Jones 1972, 344). Yassur-Landau (2005) has recently suggested that the limited number of hearths found in Israel is a result of the general rejection of this feature by the Canaanites (for a detailed discussion on the function of the hearth, see Yassur-Landau 2002, 172–174). It appears therefore, that although hearths had been important in Philistine culture, the Canaanite rejection of this feature caused its disappearance during the Iron Age I, a result of the merging of these two groups.

Epigraphic Evidence

Very little is known of early Philistine writing. There is limited evidence (e.g., seals found at Ashdod) that the Philistines arrived with their own writing system (Singer 1994, 335–337); an idea also supported by the evidence of writing in the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean and Cyprus (i.e., prior to the arrival of the Philistines in Canaan). A recently published inscription from 11th century BCE Ashkelon written in Cypro-Minoan suggests that this was the language that the Philistines wrote upon their arrival (Cross and Stager 2006, 131).

Later evidence of Philistine writing comes from Ashkelon, Ekron, and Tell Jemmeh, at which Philistine inscriptions from the 7th century BCE have been excavated (Naveh 1985; Cross 1996; Stager 1996, 66*; Gitin, Dothan and Naveh 1997). These inscriptions, written in the Semitic alphabet, exhibit affinities unique to the region of Philistia. The script has been termed “Philistine” or “Neo-Philistine” (Naveh 1985, 15; Cross 1996, 65). However, the Philistines adopted Semitic writing centuries earlier. The excavations at Tell es-Safi/Gath unearthed a number of pottery sherds and vessels with Semitic writing dating to the Iron Age IIA (10th/9th centuries BCE), all written in the Semitic alphabet, indicating that the “Neo-Philistines” used an adapted version of this script early in the Iron Age II, if not before (Maier forthcoming).

The same applies to some of the names found in these inscriptions, as well as in other documents, such as the Assyrian annals, which reflect the adoption of Semitic names used side-by-side with non-Semitic ones in the 7th century BCE. The best example is the royal dedicatory inscription from Ekron, which lists five of the city’s kings, including the Semitic name of Padi, and the non-Semitic name of Ikausu or Achish (Gitin 1998; Naveh 1998; *contra* Demski 1998). Yet it appears that the adoption of Semitic names may also have begun much earlier, as represented by an inscription of the word “le-av”, a Semitic component, discovered in an Iron IIA context at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Maier 2004).

Although information regarding Philistine names in the Iron Age I is not available, if one accepts that the Philistines were not Levantines, there is no reason to assume that they would have had Semitic names prior to their arrival in Canaan. Therefore, it appears that while the Philistines arrived with Aegean names, the “Neo-Philistines” of the Iron Age II used Semitic names alongside the Aegean names (e.g., Goliath and Achish).

Dietary Practices

Pork consumption is another factor generally linked with Philistine settlements. The studies by Hesse and Wapnish have indicated an increase in pig remains at Philistine sites in the Iron Age I, followed by a decrease returning to quantities found in Late Bronze Age levels (Hesse and Wapnish 1997, 248). At Ashkelon, pig remains decline after the 12th century BCE. At Tell Qasile there was no increase at all, probably indicating that this practice was already abandoned in the relatively early stages of the Philistine settlement (Hesse and Wapnish 1997, 248). Therefore, it seems that at Ashkelon, after introducing the consumption of pork, the Philistines abandoned this animal and reverted to the local meat-consuming customs. At Tell Qasile, pork consumption was never an issue because the first stage of Philistine settlement was not present.

In contrast to pig bones, unique archaeobotanical remains appear in Philistia in the Iron I and continue throughout the Iron Age, for example, *Lathyrus Savitus* (a unique type of legume) was found at Tell Qasile, Tel Miqne-Ekron, and Ashkelon, throughout the time span of the Philistine cultural presence at these sites (Mahler-Slasky 2004, II).

Weaving

Loomweights are another material culture item that undergoes change in Iron I Philistia. With the emergence of the Philistine material culture, pinched cylindrical loomweights appear. The foreign nature of these loomweights has been attested to, with the source being traced to Cyprus and the Aegean (Stager 1995, 346; T. Dothan 1998, 155; Barber 1991, 271, 280–281). These loomweights are found at the major Philistine cities, such as Ashdod Stratum XIIIa (M. Dothan and Porath 1993, Fig. 24, 3–5), Tel Miqne-Ekron Stratum VII (T. Dothan 1998, 154–155) and at Ashkelon in the first two stages of settlement (Stager 1995, 346). The pinched, cylindrical type, generally assigned an Aegean or Cypriot origin, soon disappears. The population of Philistia apparently abandoned the use of

Aegean loomweights by the end of the Iron Age I.

Pottery

There is a vast literature on the problems of associating “pots” with “peoples” (e.g., Kramer 1977; Bunimovitz and Yassur-Landau 1996; Finkelstein 1997; Sherratt 1998). In dealing with the Philistine material culture, however, it is impossible to ignore this issue, as it is probably the most distinctive feature of the assemblage. Given the simplicity and low cost of pottery in the ancient world (Vickers and Gill 1994), there would need to be a very good reason to change traditional pottery styles (Rotroff 1997, 98). It is therefore logical to discuss pottery as a major element of Philistine material culture.

Mycenaean IIIC:1 pottery is by far the clearest connection between the Philistines and the Aegean (T. Dothan 1982; T. Dothan and Zukerman 2004). This ceramic style presented an entire assemblage of new forms, including bell-shaped bowls and kraters, cooking jugs, stirrup jars, feeding bottles, and strainer jugs, to mention only a few. The distinct quality of the ware as well as the decoration, are its most significant trademarks (T. Dothan and Zukerman 2004), the two attributes that change most significantly throughout the Iron Age I. The later Philistine ware is not as fine, and the decoration continuously evolves from Monochrome to Bichrome, until the forms appear with no decoration at all (T. Dothan 1982). Some have already suggested that the appearance of bichrome decoration on Philistine pottery is a result of merging traditions between Canaanite decorative traditions alongside Philistine traditions (e.g. Sharon 2001). While I would agree with this statement, it does not seem that this process is complete until the end of the Iron I, when Philistine pottery continues to change drastically, such as with the appearance of red slip and burnish in later stages of the Iron Age I (e.g. Tell Qasile Stratum X) and the abandonment of Philistine forms (such as the bell-shaped bowl) in favor of more common local vessel forms (e.g., T. Dothan 1998; Ortiz 2000; Maeir forthcoming).

Over 500 whole or complete vessels have been recovered thus far from Stratum A3 at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Maeir forthcoming), dating to the Iron IIA (Maeir 2003). The assemblage is unique in that it represents a stage between the more well-known and distinct phases of the Philistine material culture, namely the Iron Age I and the Iron Age IIB/C. The assemblage includes all the common forms, and its morphology is particularly interesting in that it contains remnants of both local and foreign (Aegean) ceramic traditions (Ben-Shlomo, Shai, and Maeir

2004; Maeir forthcoming; Shai, Ben-Shlomo, and Maeir forthcoming). When this assemblage is examined alongside other assemblages from the various stages of the Philistine trajectory, it is clear that it is much closer to those that follow it than those that precede it. For example, a comparison of bowls from the Iron I, Iron IIA, and 7th century BCE shows that the last two are far more similar, having lost the bell-shape form typical in the Philistine pottery tradition. The aspects of this ceramic tradition that do continue into the Iron Age II-III are maintained until the Babylonian conquest. For example, “Late Philistine Decorated Ware” vessels, suggested as the successor of Philistine pottery in that their production and regional distribution is limited to Philistia, and they include known elements of the Philistine pottery tradition, probably continue until the Babylonian conquest (Ben-Shlomo, Shai, and Maeir 2004).

The “lion-headed cup” (rhyton), with its apparently ritual function, is one of the elements of the Philistine ceramic tradition that disappears in the Iron I. These vessels have been related to the culture of the Sea Peoples, and are of Aegean or Syrian origin (e.g., Mazar 2000, 225). They are not found in post-Iron I contexts.

Lamp-and-bowl foundation deposits are also an interesting phenomenon in Iron I Philistia. At Ekron, Canaanite forms were specifically chosen for this purpose, despite the fact that Philistine bowls are more common at the site on the whole, and this use of Canaanite forms has been linked to the desire to leave the original ritual unchanged (Mazow 2005, 440–441). The Ekron examples of lamp-and-bowl foundation deposits can clearly be linked to the Canaanite culture of the Late Bronze Age (Bunimovitz and Zimhoni 1993, 124).

The phallic-shaped vessels found at Ashkelon (Stager 1995) and Tell es-Safi/Gath (Maeir 2004) point to an additional element of the Philistine culture that seems to have continued throughout their existence. Although such vessels have not been found in early Iron Age I Philistine contexts, they appear to be of Greek inspiration (Maeir forthcoming).

It is noteworthy that not only were the forms and decoration different, but the clay recipe used for the locally-made Mycenaean IIIC:1 vessels differed from that used for indigenous local vessels. This, too, changes very quickly – the standard indigenous clay recipe is already used for Philistine Bichrome ware (Ben-Shlomo 2005, 243). Like the other adaptations, the change in clay recipes also occurs in the Iron Age I.

Acculturation as a Model for the Changes in Philistine Culture

The evidence above suggests that during the Iron Age I, many aspects of Philistine material culture changed in their internal interaction with Canaanites dwelling amongst them. These include ceramic forms and decorations, special vessel types (e.g. lion-headed cups), loomweights, dietary habits, writing and hearths. After that, the material culture of Philistia changes minimally in the Iron II. It therefore seems that the explanation of the changes in material culture as acculturation is erroneous for two primary reasons: it ignores the internal influence of Canaanites living in Philistia upon the arrival of the newcomers; and it views the major changes to the material culture as occurring equally in the Iron Age I and Iron Age II.

Alternatives to the Acculturation Model

If acculturation is not applicable, what models may better reflect the Philistine cultural change? The assimilation of the Philistines (Bunimovitz 1990) has already been shown to be problematic, as their culture continues until the seventh century BCE (Stone 1995), although in terms of identity, the Canaanites in Philistia in effect were assimilated into the Philistine population. The assimilated Canaanites may have affected the culture of the region, but they did regard themselves as Philistines, not as Canaanites (Gitin 2000, 58). The concept of “creolization” may be more appropriate for describing these cultural changes, in that it is the suggested result of interactions within a culture, as well as external influences (Maier 2004). Creolization, however, continues to stress a gradual trajectory of change throughout the Iron Age. As seen from the evidence above, the change in the Iron I and Iron II cannot be categorized in the same manner. Collingwood’s cultural fusion model (1932), or the “Romanization” (in this case, “Philistinization”) model may also be suggested. However, Romanization suggests a unidirectional flow of influence, from a stronger entity to a weaker community (Alcock 1997, 1). As the exact nature of the Canaanite-Philistine relations in the Iron Age I are not fully understood, this model may not be relevant. Furthermore, the flow of influence in Philistia is bidirectional. It should be borne in mind that the heterogeneous nature of the region is probably what led to the culture changes, making it easier for those living together to group themselves together (comparable to Classical Corinth [e.g., Rotroff 1997,

110]). The cultural fusion model may best fit the Philistine/Canaanite phenomenon, as it describes two different cultural influences merging into a single culture (e.g., Mahbubani 1995).

Cultural Fusion

The merger or fusion of cultures is not an uncommon process, and is well documented cross-culturally. Shifts in identity in different situations occur according to the interests of the group or groups involved (Barth 1969). Burmeister notes that groups of Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians living in Transylvania merged (although he labeled the process “reciprocal acculturation”) to the point where the groups could no longer be distinguished (Burmeister 2000, 545). Voss (2005) observes that the ethno-genesis of mixed groups living in El Presidio de San Francisco, California, in the early 1800s led to the fusion of their cultures, and, in turn, to the emergence of the Californio identity, as reflected in the archaeological record in table and cooking ware. Interestingly, the changes in culture occurred exclusively among the people living in the community, who had separated themselves from external communities in order to preserve their unique culture.

The cultural fusion concept is not new to the study of the Philistines. Other studies have suggested that the indigenous and immigrant populations of Philistia merged to form a single new culture (e.g., Bunimovitz and Yassur-Landau 1996; Sharon 2001). However, these studies assumed that the complete fusion occurred in the early Iron Age I with the appearance of Philistine Bichrome pottery, and the changes from that point onwards were the result of the acculturation of the Philistines, influenced by their surroundings. Considering that the major changes in Philistine culture had begun at the time, this explanation hardly suffices. For example, while the shift from Monochrome to Bichrome pottery is probably a result of the merger of the two populations, so is the disappearance of traditional Philistine decoration on pottery, as well as of the typical pottery forms, at the end of the Iron Age I. It therefore seems that the process of fusion was not completed until late in the Iron Age I or early in the Iron Age II. From this point on, the changes in the Philistine culture are minimal. The presence and merger of the two groups is so strongly apparent at certain sites that their population has been termed “Canaano-Philistines” (Gadot 2003, 255). While this may be less evident at the Philistine Pentapolis sites, it clearly also applies. This is not to suggest

that the changes occurred to an equal degree and simultaneously throughout Philistia. On the contrary, it is most likely that the culture changed more rapidly in areas where more Canaanites were being assimilated, while in the core Philistine areas, these changes occurred later. For example, Canaanite cooking pots are found in Early Iron I levels at Ashdod Stratum XIII (M. Dothan and Porath 1993), and Ekron Stratum VII-V (Mazow 2004). At Ekron, initially only 2% of cooking vessels are Canaanite, but this changes drastically in the 11th century BCE in the transition from Stratum VIA to Stratum VB (Mazow 2004). The changes at Ekron, therefore, seem to occur later, probably because of a high percentage of population of Aegean origin.

Philistine Cultural Fusion as a Reactive Phenomenon

Assuming that the Philistine immigrants settled among the Canaanites in Philistia and developed a new culture, one must ask why each culture would be willing to abandon their own customs for new ones. It has been observed that the emergence of a new cultural system, such as that of the Philistines, is a dramatic result of punctuated evolution; in other words, there must be a good reason for cultural groups to want to merge and form a new culture (Rosenberg 1994, 308). Although no definitive answers can be provided, it is possible that the Philistines established themselves as an elite population (e.g., Mazar 1985, 106). The local Canaanite population may originally have wished to emulate Philistine culture, but over time, being the majority, the Canaanites returned to certain aspects of their own culture. In the meantime, the Philistines absorbed cultural elements from the majority indigenous population, until a unified culture was formed. But why would the Philistines accept the Canaanites? It has been suggested that the Philistines adopted Canaanite customs in order to downplay their foreignness (Mazow 2005, 443). This would follow the principle that cultural (and population) fusion is often an attempt to reduce conflict (Shennan 2000, 819).

Another explanation may be related to occurrences to the east of Philistia. Faust (2003) has suggested that the development of the state of Judah was in a large part a reaction to the development of Philistia. Faust points out that towards the end of the Iron Age I, there is a general abandonment of rural sites in favour of cities. He explains that this phenomenon is a result of arising needs for security (better provided in cities than in rural settlements),

as well as forced settlement in cities by the rulers of the Judean state, in order to facilitate administrative control and strengthen their rule (Faust 2003, 156–157). I would suggest that in the same vein, the development of Judah may have accelerated the merger of cultures in Philistia. It is not uncommon for ethnic groups to form as a reaction to “power relations” (S. Jones 1999, 224). It is likely that in the constant struggle between the two, the Canaanites, which lived among the two groups, were an important asset that both the Philistines and the Israelites chose to incorporate in order to strengthen themselves. However, the idea that the Philistine fusion is in some way linked to state formation in Judah is completely dependant on the existence of such a state in Judah in the Iron Age I – which is not agreed upon (most recently, see Finkelstein 2005, in response to Faust’s article). If there was no Judean state until the Iron Age II, then internal reasons for the fusion would be the most likely.

Conclusions

Acculturation may still be relevant in understanding the changes in Philistine culture throughout the Iron Age, if it is defined as the adoption of values and norms from another culture (e.g., Pires and Stanton 2000, 43), but it lacks an adequate explanation for why a group would adopt another’s values and norms. In understanding changing culture as a product of the merger of two distinct cultures or, in essence, the rise of a new culture, it is easier to explain the need for peoples to modify their behavior. The adoption of Canaanite values into the Philistine culture and vice versa was a medium of communication between the two groups (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1992, 131) that facilitated the smooth flow of the merger of the population of Philistia. The need for this merger is evident in the “close quarters” shared by the indigenous and immigrant peoples. A hostile environment may also have advanced this process.

The original Philistine culture lost many of its attributes while retaining others, yet this all happens within the confines of the Iron Age I. From that point on, the Neo-Philistine culture is relatively static, although gradual changes can be observed in the process of descent with modifications, i.e., practices are passed on within a culture, yet change occurs in these practices over time (Shennan 2000). The changes in Neo-Philistine culture in the Iron Age II cannot be classified any differently than those that occur in all static cultures.

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