

## DID TRADE STOP IN THE EARLY IRON AGE? THE EVIDENCE FROM PHILISTIA AND BEYOND

### PAROU O COMÉRCIO NO INÍCIO DA IDADE DO FERRO? EVIDÊNCIAS DE FILÍSTIA E MAIS ALÉM

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**Abstract:** The transition between the Late Bronze and Iron Age, often described as a collapse, is most often characterized by comparing the changes between these two periods. As trade and connectivity is one of the hallmarks of the Late Bronze Age, the lack of evidence for international trade during the early Iron Age is seen of evidence of the profound changes that occurred during this transition. In this paper, I will reassess the evidence for international trade during the early Iron Age in Philistia and neighboring regions, demonstrating that while there was a substantial degrading in the volume of international trade during this period, it did not cease completely. And based on this, what does this tell us about the processes and mechanisms occurring during the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age transition in the eastern Mediterranean.

**Keywords:** Trade. Connectivity. Late Bronze. Iron Age. Philistia. Eastern Mediterranean

**Resumo:** A transição entre o Bronze Final e a Idade do Ferro, muitas vezes descrita como um colapso, é mais frequentemente caracterizada comparando as mudanças observadas entre esses dois períodos. Como o comércio e a conectividade são uma das marcas do final da Idade do Bronze, a falta de evidências do comércio internacional durante o início da Idade do Ferro é vista como evidência das profundas mudanças que ocorreram durante essa transição. Neste artigo, reavaliarei as evidências do comércio internacional durante o início da Idade do Ferro na Filístia e nas regiões vizinhas, demonstrando que, embora tenha havido uma degradação substancial no volume do comércio internacional durante esse período, ela não cessou completamente. E com base nisso, o que isso nos diz sobre os processos e mecanismos que ocorrem durante a transição da Idade do Bronze Final/Idade do Ferro no Mediterrâneo oriental.

**Palavras-chave:** Troca. Conectividade. Bronze Tardio. Era do aço. Filístia. Mediterrâneo oriental

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## 1. Introduction

The transition between the Late Bronze Age (LB) and the Iron Age (ca. 1200 BCE) is one of the most fascinating and highly debated time frames in the history of the eastern Mediterranean. Often seen as a classic example of a societal collapse (e.g., Cline, 2014, 2021), with many attempts to date the timing of this transition (e.g., Asscher & Boaretto, 2019; Boaretto et al., 2019; Finkelstein, 2018, 2020). Recent research has demonstrated that in fact this transition was a long, drawn out and complex set of underlying mechanisms and processes, most likely lasting some 200 years – from ca. 1250 BCE until the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This extended complexity can be demonstrated by the protracted dating of destruction/abandonment of LB “Canaanite” cities in the southern Levant (e.g. Kreimerman, 2017), from Hazor which seems to have gone through an extended process of destruction and abandonment throughout an extended portion of the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE (e.g. Ben-Tor, 2020; Bechar et al., 2022) to the last Canaanite city of Megiddo which was destroyed in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE (e.g. Martin et al., 2020), while at other sites there was no clear break at all (e.g. Rehov: Mazar, 2022; Mazar et al., 2019). More so, the possibility that many LB sites were not destroyed, but were abandoned over an extended period, should be taken into account (e.g., Millek, 2017, 2022). Along the same line, more and more evidence regarding the role of climate change in this transition (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2017; Kaniewski et al., 2019; Molloy, 2022), and the protracted processes connected to this, hardly allow one to look for short and mono-causal, event-based explanation for this transition. If one zooms in on the southern Coastal Plain of Canaan – the region of Philistia – while it has been claimed that the appearance of the Philistine culture, which traditionally associated as being the result of battles between Ramses III and the “Sea Peoples” (ca. 1180 BCE; e.g., Cline, 2014; Dothan, 1982; Oren, 2000), recent research has raised the possibility that this is a much more drawn out process, commencing already in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and lasting several decades (e.g., Boaretto et al., 2019; Maeir, 2022c, 2022d; Maeir & Hitchcock, 2017; Yasur-Landau, 2010).

Traditionally, as part of the signs of this “collapse,” the vibrant international trade that existed in the LB (recently, see, e.g., Fischer, 2023; Kristiansen et al., 2018; Millek, 2022; Padgham, 2014) supposedly ends quite suddenly in the early Iron Age. This was seen as an excellent example of the drastic change between these two periods – that of an international character in the LB, and a localized parochial character in the early Iron Age. Recently, more and more evidence has emerged that this picture is in need of revision. While without a doubt there was a lowering of the intensity of connectivity between the southern Levant and other parts of the ancient Near East, the Mediterranean and beyond, this connectivity halt completely as previously suggested (e.g., Dever, 1992, p. 105; Stern, 1993), but continued at a lower intensity (e.g., Greenberg, 2019; Maeir, 2022c, 196; Master, 2021; Millek, 2022), and at times, in a different character (e.g., Sherratt, 2016). In this paper, I will review the evidence mainly from Philistia pertaining to this issue, and discuss its broader implications.

## 2. Trade in the Iron Age I

### 2.1 Early Iron Age I

There is no doubt that the volume – and diversity – of trade in the early Iron Age is quite much less extensive than in the previous Late Bronze Age. Nevertheless, various evidence points to continued trade in Philistia, both with other regions of the Levant and beyond.

While most of the early Philistine pottery (Philistine 1/Myc IIIC) in early Iron Age Philistia is locally produced, two examples of imported Myc IIIC pottery (from Cyprus) have been reported from the early Iron I levels at Ashkelon (Master et al., 2015; Mountjoy, 2018, 2020). Similar imported Myc IIIC pottery is known from sites in northern Israel (e.g., Mountjoy, 2018; Sherratt & Mazar, 2013).

Evidence of Cypriot and Egyptian influence, most probably due to direct contacts between Philistia and these regions, can be seen in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Philistine culture. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the decorated Philistine pottery (Philistine 2/Bichrome; e.g., Dothan & Zukerman, 2015; Maeir, 2008) specific shapes and decorative motifs appear, which are clearly connected with Egyptian (Ben-Dor Evian, 2011) and Cypriot (Zukerman, 2013) traditions.

Martin (2008; 2011, p. 201) notes several imported Egyptian vessels from the earliest Philistine phase at Ashkelon. While most are probably residual from earlier periods, some appear to have arrived after the appearance of the Philistine culture at the site. It would be quite logical to assume that this can be connected to sites in southern Philistia and the northwestern Negev which show signs of Egyptian presence and Egyptian pottery and other finds at this time (e.g., Martin, 2011), evidence of the final, and waning, Egyptian control of the region during the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

At Tell el-Farah (South), evidence of Egyptian imports and influences are found in the early Iron I, both in ceramics and scarabs (Laemmel, 2003). Similarly, a certain amount of Cypriote imported pottery was found in this period (Laemmel, 2003).

Thus, as noted above, while the evidence of trade is not extensive, finds from various sites in the Southern Levant, both in Philistia and beyond, indicate that interregional and international trade did not cease in the early Iron Age (ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

### 2.2 Late Iron Age I

In the later phases of the Iron Age I, the volume of trade substantially expands. This is seen with evidence from more sites, a larger diversity of finds, and most importantly, from a broad range of regions, including from very distant ones.

Master (2009) reports several late Iron Age I imported vessels from Ashkelon, originating from Cyprus, Phoenicia and the Syrian coast. At Ashdod, Phoenician pottery is reported from late Iron I contexts, though not in excessive quantities (summarized in Ben-

Shlomo, 2005, pp. 196, 211). At Tel Miqne-Ekron, Dothan (1998) discussed an “early Phoenician cache” from the early Iron IIA, which included Phoenician and Egyptian objects.

Cypriote and Phoenician imports and Phoenician-style pottery were reported from Tell Qasile, Stratum X (late Iron I). This includes three White Painted ware fragments (Mazar, 1985, p. 85, Fig. 27:4–6), two Black-on-Red sherds (Mazar, 1985, p. 82, Fig. 57:30), as well as several vessels of Phoenician Bichrome ware (*ibid.*, p. 84).

Organic Residue Analysis (ORA) of early Iron Age ceramic flasks from Tell Qasile, as well as from Dor (in southern Phoenicia) and from Tel Kinrot, were shown to contain cinnamon (Gilboa & Namdar, 2015; Namdar et al., 2013), an import of southeastern Asian origin.

At Tell el-Farah (South), the Egyptian imports and influences already found in the early Iron I, continue and expand in the late Iron I (Laemmel, 2003). Likewise, Cypriote imported pottery, including imported “Wheelmade Bucchero” ware, is reported in this period (Laemmel, 2003).

From Tell es-Safi/Gath, several objects of apparent Egyptian origin (or influence) were found in various late Iron I and Iron IIA contexts at Tell es-Safi/Gath. This includes various types of seals and sealings (Keel, 2013, pp. 94–123; Münger, 2018), as well as assorted faience amulets (Wimmer and Görg 2020). This fits in with other evidence of Egyptian imports and influence in Iron I Philistia (Ben-Dor Evian, 2011, 2012, 2018), and in southern Phoenicia (Waiman-Barak et al. 2014).

An ivory bowl from the late Iron I levels in Area A at Tell es-Safi/Gath, is likewise imported, most likely from Phoenicia (Maeir et al., 2015). As opposed to most of the ivories from early Iron Age Philistia which are local (Ben-Dor Evian, 2018; Ben-Shlomo & Dothan, 2006), the parallels of this bowl (from Megiddo) point to a more northern origin of this bowl, perhaps from Phoenicia.

The cemetery at Tel Erani, to the south of Tell es-Safi/Gath, also revealed long range connections dating to the late Iron I (Scott et al., 2020). Analysis of dental plaque from skeletal remains in a non-elite burial in this cemetery demonstrated the consumption of exotic foods, including millet, sesame and banana. These foods are non-local, most likely deriving from Southeast Asia (save for banana, which may derive from east Africa). Notably, these finds indicate that not only were materials of distant origins in circulation during the early Iron Age, but even in non-elite contexts at a rather peripheral site.

Overall, the finds from Philistia and other sites in the Southern Levant indicate that as opposed to the early Iron I (12<sup>th</sup> century BCE), when trade existed, but was limited, during the late phases of the Iron Age I (ca. 11<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), there is an extensive expansion in trade between Philistia (and other parts of the southern Levant) and other regions in the ancient Near East (and beyond).

### 3. Discussion and Conclusions

The evidence presented above shows that while a major difference between the LB and early Iron Age was the extent of international trade, as opposed to earlier suggestions which posited a termination of international trade (e.g., Dever, 1992, p. 105; Stern, 1993), this trade never ceased. Rather, its volume substantially decreased, but nevertheless continued. Most likely, this was the result of a combination of structural, political and economic changes that occurred during this protracted transitional period (e.g., Maeir, 2022c, 2022d; Sherratt, 2016). While Millek (2022) has argued that the continuation of trade, along with the lack of evidence for extensive destructions in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE is evidence of the overall continuity between the periods, I believe this should be viewed from a different perspective. Accordingly, the entire period of transition between the LB and Iron Age was a long and drawn out time frame, ca. two centuries, in which complex – and sometime even opposing – processes occurred (e.g., Middleton, 2021). During this extended timeframe, various polities collapsed (e.g., Hazor and Megiddo) while others continued (e.g. Rehov). In certain regions, such as Philistia and the Central Hills of Canaan, new identity groups appeared (e.g., Philistines, “Israelites”), the result of complex formational processes (e.g., Maeir, 2019, 2021, 2022c, 2022d). Throughout this time frame (12<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), there were additional changes and fluxes, in many socio-economic aspects, including trade. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, perhaps following historical events in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean, the volume and character of international trade transformed. While it did not cease, it was of much smaller extent and volume, and most likely its character and the underlying mechanisms behind changed as well. This situation soon transformed, and from the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century BCE and onward, the volume – and horizon – of international trade expands again, until eventually, during the Iron IIA and following periods, it even surpasses the trade networks of the LB (e.g., Maeir, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

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