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**IMMINENT INVASION:
THE ABANDONMENT OF PHILISTINE EKRON**

For Gaza shall be forsaken,
and Ashkelon a desolation:
they shall drive out Ashdod at the noon day,
and Ekron shall be rooted up. (Zephaniah 2:4)

Introduction

Determining the cause of societal collapse is of great interest to social historians (Kurjack 1974: 96) and anthropologists alike. Attempts to explain such collapse have relied on a number of influential factors which include environmental degradation, failed economic systems, internal revolt, plague and military conquest. Regarding the latter, evidence demonstrating a centre's fall to invaders is sometimes documented in the annals of the victor, and archaeologically the event may be recognized by contemporary levels of destruction debris at the site in question. No doubt the conflagration of a city was devastating, resulting in great loss of human life, possessions and property. Despite this, in many cases, survivors of invaded territories eventually revived their community and their way of life continued. But in other instances a city's destruction had a much more profound impact, as the event not only represented urban destruction, but also signaled the end of the culture.

Such was the case with the Philistines residing at Ekron in the late Iron Age. The Neo-Babylonian destruction of the city near the end of the 7th century BCE did not simply mark the final Philistine occupation there (a locality at which they had settled for the previous six centuries). The conflagration of Ekron was the final link in a chain of events that, combined with the integration of the Philistines into Neo-Assyrian and Egyptian spheres of influence (Gitin 1998a: 179–80), contributed to their complete dissolution as a distinct cultural group. After Nebuchadnezzar's campaign in the region, regarded as one of the central events during his first regnal year (Malamat 1956: 251), the Philistines lost their cultural core, and eventually were unable to maintain their own distinct group identity (Gitin 1998a: 163). Shortly thereafter their mention in the historical record disappears altogether (Gitin 1995: 74). Thus, Ekron's destruction is significant because its fall heralded the final phase of Philistine culture.

Ekron's inhabitants were aware of the coming invasion, and the evidence illustrates that they took measures to evacuate the city. Ekron's abandonment has been indicated through epigraphic and

archaeological evidence (Gitin 1989a: 29; Gitin 1998a: 180; Gitin and Golani 2001: 38; Golani and Sass 1998: 61; Porten 1981). The evacuation of a city the size that Ekron had become in the 7th century BCE would have been a formidable organizational feat. That its inhabitants responded quickly to a rapidly developing crisis illustrates the efficacy of the administrators operating under such conditions (see Crumley 2001: 26), and attests to the cooperative and coordinative efforts that would have cross-cut many social divisions (e.g., class, occupation, age and gender).

Ekron's desertion may also be recognized through another component of the archaeological evidence unearthed during the excavations conducted at Tel Miqne-Ekron, led by T. Dothan of The Hebrew University and S. Gitin, Director of the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research. Zooarchaeological analysis often addresses topics relating to animal acquisition and associated exploitation strategies, yet this analytical approach can also focus on site formation processes and the identification of those agents responsible for the accumulation of a faunal assemblage. Attributes of the 7th century BCE faunal material from Tel Miqne indicate that it was abandoned prior to the arrival of the Neo-Babylonian invasion. The fauna also demonstrates a brief time lapse between Ekron's desertion and Nebuchadnezzar's arrival. This is significant because it corroborates other evidence for abandonment, and expands the range of archaeological evidence by which Ekron's evacuation can be recognized. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate the integrative advantage gained by merging zooarchaeological analysis with archaeological and historical evidence to investigate the final days of Philistine occupation at Tel Miqne-Ekron.

The Archaeology of 7th Century Tel Miqne-Ekron

Tel Miqne-Ekron is located 35 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem and lies on the eastern edge of the inner coastal plain, which served as a frontier zone separating Philistia and the Kingdom of Judah. Fourteen seasons of excavation (1981–1996) at Tel Miqne have demonstrated the changing role of the city. In the 12th century BCE Ekron was a 20 ha metropolis, representing the largest of the five capital cities of the Philistine Pentapolis (Gitin 1987: 206–7). Very little is known of the political inner workings of these Philistine city-states, but both biblical and Assyrian sources indicate that on occasion they did not operate in harmony (Singer 1993: 133). After its destruction in the 10th century BCE, Ekron's ability to defend the northeastern frontiers of Philistia diminished, and for two centuries it was reduced to a 4 ha semi-independent fortified town (Gitin 1987: 206–8). During this period, the Philistines were not a major force in the historical or cultural development of the region and came under foreign influence many times (Aharoni 1979: 307–45).

In 701 BCE, Sennacherib had to reassert Neo-Assyrian control over Philistia and Ekron, just over a decade after the city had been conquered by Sargon II (Gitin 1995: 62). It was only after the end of

the 8th century BCE, when Ekron (as well as the rest of Philistia) had come under Neo-Assyrian rule, that the city expanded to more than 34 ha and enjoyed great commercial success (Gitin 1989a: 26–45). Neo-Assyrian texts demonstrate Assyria's relationship with Philistia, as well as their aggressive march toward a new political order that emphasized international exchange and commerce (Gitin 1997: 77–84; Tadmor 1966: 98–100).

Gitin (1987: 216) has identified a number of reasons why the Neo-Assyrians chose Ekron as a major olive oil production center: clear access to routes leading to olive groves and market places, site topography, surplus labor force, available nearby rich alluvial plain, and the empowerment of puppet Philistine rulers loyal to Assyrian kings and their interests. Alternatively, Na'aman (2003: 87) has asserted that Ekron was not singled out by the Neo-Assyrians nor awarded preferential status among their western vassals. Rather, Ekron's prosperity at the time was merely a consequence of the new socio-political and economic conditions prevalent in the region. Assyria withdrew from the area around 630 BCE (Tadmor 1966: 86–87), creating a power vacuum that was opportunistically filled by Egypt (Malamat 1979: 205; Porten 1981: 48).

The last days of Philistine Ekron came to pass at the end of the 7th century BCE. When Nebuchadnezzar razed Ekron to the ground in 604 BCE (Gitin 1998b: 276, n. 2), he left evidence of devastation in most areas of the city. Whereas Neo-Assyrian interests were focused on exploiting the economic potential of their vassal city-states, Babylonian interest in Philistia (and the region) was limited to controlling the terrestrial routes to Egypt. In doing so, they squandered a rich source of tribute and tax payments (Gitin 1992: 30). Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Ekron had a crushing affect on the Philistines from which they would never recover.

Philistine Cultural Assimilation

After their conquest and subsequent exile, the Philistine inhabitants of Ekron were unable to retain the key elements of their cultural heritage. Why they failed to do so can be explained in part by their increasing consumption and adoption of foreign cultural elements and practices. Evidence for this is reflected in a variety of classes of material culture, including ceramics, architecture, cultic objects, jewelry and art, and texts.

Early Philistine monochrome pottery, for example, demonstrates similar wares, shapes, and decorations to forms simultaneously produced in Cyprus, yet some Canaanite elements are also present (Dothan 1987: 202). Traces of Egyptian and Canaanite influences are also apparent in the later Philistine bichrome ceramics (Dothan 1982: chp. 3). Pottery of the 7th century BCE also demonstrates a variety of cultural influences, including Phoenician, Judean, Assyrian, East Greek and Transjordanian elements/characteristics (Gitin 1998a: 167).

Cultural orientations and influences are also inferred architecturally. One key feature of an Iron Age I (Stratum VI) building at Tel Miqne is a

large circular hearth (Dothan and Gitin 1997: 31) associated with large amounts of burnt ash and bones (Dothan 1998: 156). In a subsequent phase of this complex (Stratum IV) the hearth is completely absent. Circular hearths were a regular feature in Mycenaean palaces, and their appearance in Philistia therefore suggests a similar function. That this central feature disappeared from this cult complex suggests a community whose collective memory of their Aegean heritage had faded with time (Dothan and Dothan 1992: 245). Foreign influence is also evident in the architecture of Temple Complex 650 (Gitin et al. 1997). This complex dates to the 7th century BCE (Stratum IB/IC) and does not include a hearth or any other Aegean cultural influence. Recognized as one of the largest structures ever discovered in the southern Levant, its schematic is reminiscent of Neo-Assyrian palatial, religious and elite residential buildings (Gitin et al. 1997).

Foreign influence is also evident in small cultic objects that were used by Ekron's population. Egyptian style artifacts dating to the 10th century BCE include a carved ivory head, a painted limestone zoomorphic (baboon) figurine, faience and ivory earrings, and a faience pendant depicting the Egyptian goddess Hathor (Dothan and Dothan 1992: 252), while a ring displays the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet (Dothan and Gitin 1997: 31). Four-horned altars found in the later 7th century BCE city imply a northern Israelite influence. Gitin (1989b: 61) believes their appearance can be explained by the population migration policies of the Neo-Assyrians. Altars may have been introduced into Philistia by Israelite craftsmen who, having been uprooted from their own territories, were then forced to resettle at Ekron.

Jewelry caches found at Ekron (Gitin and Golani 2001; Golani and Sass 1998) demonstrate that the Philistines adorned themselves with objects inspired by Phoenician stylistic traditions, including a silver lotus pendant, basket earring pendants, finger rings with an attached cartouche, multi-stranded rings with knots, granule beads, and a bracelet centerpiece. Egyptian elements were also found in these caches, such as a composite earring with a human face below the petals of the lotus flower, rings with a lotus decoration in relief, and an Eye of Horus made of sheet silver.

Philistine fashion and art also demonstrates external influence. Three small grooved discs (probably decorative ear lobe plugs) from one of Ekron's Iron I structures (Building 350) were made in an Egyptian style (Dothan 2003a). Culturally modified ivory objects from the Iron Age I, such as inlays, are clearly inspired by Egyptian traditions, whereas cosmetic boxes and duck heads exhibit Canaanite affinities (Ben-Shlomo and Dothan 2006: 27–28). The ivory lid of a pyxis also displays Canaanite traits (Dothan 2003b).

By the 7th century BCE, Philistine texts betray foreign influence. For example, when establishing Kar-Ashshur-ahu-iddina (the "Port of Esarhaddon"), a commercial colony near Sidon designed to further the commercial interests of the Assyrian empire, Esarhaddon did so with the aid of Philistine kings possessing Canaanite or Assyrian names (Tadmor 1966: 98). At Ekron, fifteen small dedicatory inscriptions

dating to the same period, located south of Temple Complex 650, invoke the Canaanite deity Asherat (Gitin 1993: 252–54). Another dedicatory inscription reads ‘for Ba’al and for Padi,’ and is written in a Phoenician/Aramaic cursive script (Gitin and Cogan 1999: 199). By the 7th century BCE, the Philistines clearly had adopted elements of these languages and created a text or dialect distinctly their own (Gitin et al. 1997: 13; Rainey 1998: 244).

In summary, the material evidence clearly demonstrates the semi-permeability of the Philistine culture. From their urban architecture to items of personal adornment and self-expression, the affects and influences of foreign cultural contact reverberated throughout the cultural matrix of the Philistines. Including foreign cultural elements was probably a useful adaptive trait, and demonstrates their degree of cultural flexibility rather than cultural rigidity. Flexible community social organization allows populations to adjust to new situations (Crumley 2001: 24) that may have otherwise caused detrimental economic and political climates. Integrating these foreign cultural attributes implies some level of flexibility in the internal organization of the recipient community, since their utilization would have incorporated perceptual and attitudinal shifts by the active members. However, all cultures have their adaptive limitations (Webb 1973: 368). The Neo-Babylonian campaign of the late 7th century BCE represented a defining moment in Near Eastern history that contributed significantly to the discontinuance of Philistine culture which, despite their adaptive abilities, they were unable to overcome.

Archaeological Evidence of Abandonment at Tel Migne-Ekron

Ekron’s inhabitants were acutely aware of the impending Neo-Babylonian invasion, and made preparations to deal with the situation. Their options ranged from fighting to fleeing, and the evidence attests to their pursuit of the latter option. A letter written to the Egyptian pharaoh from Adon, possibly a king from Ekron, pleads for deliverance from the approaching Neo-Babylonian forces (Porten 1981). Given the widespread devastation discovered at Ekron, it seems unlikely that help was received from Egypt or any other neighboring kingdom.

Silver hoards found at Tel Migne represent the largest collection of their kind in Israel (Gitin 1998a: 180). A total of six caches were found, consisting of more than 300 pieces of silver. The source of the silver is thought to be Greece (Gitin and Golani 2001: 38). At least four of the six hoards were hidden. One was placed in a jug found buried below a floor. Another was put inside a small juglet which was set inside a larger vessel and then sealed under a floor. A third hoard was stashed inside a stone weight originally used for pressing olives, but which had then been hewn down for reuse, and may even have served as an early form of wall safe. This hoard included a silver medallion with an Assyrian cultic motif depicting Ishtar standing on the back of lion (Gitin 1995: 69; Gitin and Golani 2001: 30–33, 41). The final hidden hoard was found in association with the threshold of one of the side rooms in Temple Complex 650 (Gitin and Golani 2001: 36).

These valuables were most likely hidden by their owners, who did so with intentions of future retrieval (Golani and Sass 1998: 61).

Examining the condition of the city's fortification system provides another clue that Ekron knew of the Neo-Babylonian approach. Nevertheless, fortifications near the city gate in the southern sector of the city showed no signs of destruction, even though all of the structures comprising the industrial zone in that area were razed to the ground (Gitin 1989a: 29), suggesting that the Babylonian attackers did not encounter any resistance upon their arrival, and therefore simply laid waste to the city. Fourteen seasons of excavation have also failed to uncover any human skeletons belonging to this phase, suggesting that there was no one left in the city when the Babylonians arrived.

Faunal Evidence of Abandonment

Although well-suited to evaluating the economics and ecologies of a settlement, the study of animal bones can also assist in identifying site formation processes, which in turn can influence the interpretation of an archeological faunal assemblage (Gautier 1987: 50). A consideration of the factors that contributed to the accumulation of animal bones in an archaeological context can be used to identify whether their deposition was a result of cultural (human) or natural (non-human) activity. Differentiating between these two activities is critical, because deposition by non-human agents can reflect the occupational status (active or abandoned) of the site or an area of the site.

In some instances, the remains of animals in an archaeological bone assemblage include species whose economic importance to humans is doubtful. Since some animals were probably not exploited as a human food resource, the presence of small rodents and similar sized animals not typically consumed by people may be the result of their own attempts at colonization, or through introduction by birds of prey or other wild or domestic carnivores (Redding 1978: 64–65). Such remains have been termed penecontemporaneous intrusives (Gautier 1987: 49).

Scientific study has established how the scavenging and predatory nature of different species can be documented. The role of animals such as dogs and hyaenas as bone accumulators, as well the scavenging patterns of domestic chickens, vultures, and even crows, has been ethnographically recorded (Brain 1981: 15; LaBianca 1995: 27–29). Zoological studies have demonstrated how birds of prey kill and eat a range of species that include small mammals and birds (e.g., Bocheński et al. 1998; Bramwell et al. 1987; Davis 1987: 25; Saavedra and Simonetti 1998; Schmitt 1995; Tores and Yom-Tov 2003). Carnivores leave recognizable traces on bones due to their gnawing, crushing, and chewing (Brain 1981). Raptors tend to return to their roost with their prey, where they let pass the undigested parts of their prey (which are swallowed whole), such as hair, skin and bones (Wapnish and Hesse 2000: 444).

Both avian and terrestrial bone accumulators leave evidence of their partial digestion of animal bones. When exposed to acids and

enzymes, the fauna are eroded into fragments with small holes, altered edges, pitted and polished surfaces, and thinned shafts (e.g., Bocheński et al. 1998: 428; Davis 1987: 27; Horwitz 1990; Reitz and Wing 1999; Schmitt and Juell 1994: 252–54). Bone modification caused by the consumption patterns of carnivores and birds of prey has previously been identified in archaeological contexts. Some of these accumulations have occurred in areas thought to have been abandoned (e.g., West and Milne 1993; Hesse and Wapnish 1985: 20), in spaces that were deserted or at least assumed to have hosted limited cultural interaction (Wapnish and Hesse 2000: 444), or in ‘exterior’ rather than ‘interior’ areas, suggesting activity-specific spatial units (Meadow 1975: 270).

The 7th century Faunal Assemblage from Tel Miqne

The 7th century BCE levels at Tel Miqne yielded the remains of hundreds of small animals, most of which were small bodied mammals. A few were identified as rodents, and it is likely that most, if not all, of the small mammal faunal assemblage was derived from rodent species (see Table 1). In addition to the microfauna, thousands of unidentified bone fragments were also found, of which a portion undoubtedly belong to small animal species. It is important to note that the skeletal remains of small animals are subject to greater fragmentation and taphonomic loss than those of larger-bodied specimens. Since the bones of small animals are less dense and not as likely to have survived, their original abundance was probably greater than the sample recovered. None of these species would ever have been economically important to Ekron’s human population.

Table 1. Faunal categories and associated modifications via consumption from Tel Miqne-Ekron (7th century BCE).

Faunal Classification	*NISP #	NISP %	NISP digested	NISP gnawed
Taxonomically Identified **	5767	32.47%	4	12
Small Amphibian	1	0.01%	0	0
Small Bird	31	0.17%	8	0
Small Reptile	1	0.01%	0	0
Small Mammal ***	209	1.18%	34	0
Medium Mammal	6159	34.68%	44	11
Large Mammal	1142	6.43%	12	16
Unidentified species	4449	25.05%	36	23
Total	17759	100.00%	138	62

* Number of Identified Specimens.

** Reflects those animals most closely linked to human acquisition and use.

*** Includes rodent remains.

An examination of the small mammal remains has revealed that some were eroded and pitted (Table 1), modifications which are consistent with those associated with the meal remnants of birds of prey. Not all of the bones were altered, and it is possible that some of these animals simply died of natural causes in levels dating to the 7th century BCE. However, since digested bones from small mammals

were noted across different body part categories (cranial, limb, and trunk), indicating that their predators had access to a variety of anatomical parts (see Table 2), it seems reasonable to assume that most of these animals were consumed and deposited by birds of prey. Not all small animal body parts will necessarily be consumed by raptors (e.g., Bengston 1971). Thus, even when a small animal was brought to an area by a bird of prey, some of its bones might appear unaltered. Since their presence cannot be attributed to human collection, the introduction of many of the small animals in the stratified 7th century BCE levels at Tel Miqne-Ekron are best explained as a consequence of the consumption practices and preferences of owls, hawks or other birds of prey.

Table 2. Body part categories of small mammal remains and digested proportion from Tel Miqne-Ekron (7th century BCE).

Body Part	NISP #	NISP %	NISP digested
Cranial	31	14.83%	4
Limb	43	20.57%	11
Axial	135	64.59%	19
Total	209	100.00%	34

Certain attributes of the 7th century BCE faunal assemblage at Ekron also indicate the activities of terrestrial carnivores. Payne and Munson (1985) have shown experimentally how the digestive tract of a dog can affect the bones of the animal it has consumed. Particularly notable are the relatively small sizes of the digested fragments. Data based on hyena scats from a den in the Negev Desert, in Israel, have shown that digestion erodes, polishes, pits and thins the consumed bones (Maher and Peterhans-Kerbis n.d.). A small number of bones from Tel Miqne displayed the same patterns of modification (Table 1). The surface of these bones were pitted and polished, whereas others were eroded and etched, resulting in thinned shaft walls, sometimes to the point of producing holes. All of the partially digested bones and bone fragments were less than 2.2 cm in length, further confirming Payne and Munson's observations. These modifications were only noted on certain bones, rather than the entire faunal assemblage, eliminating soil chemistry as the modifying agent.

These distinctive faunal patterns were found in many areas of the site, including Temple Complex 650, which is highly significant. Attributes of the remains of larger bodied domestic animals recovered from the temple complex, when compared to other contemporary areas of the site, have indicated a distinctive use pattern reflective of ritual activity. Sacrificial animals, generally younger, male, and probably of good health, were brought to the temple complex where they were killed and butchered in a specific manner for presentation to the deity as a burnt offering (Maher 2004). Over forty ceramic vessels, mainly bowls, either contained or were closely associated with these animal

bones. Moreover, of particular significance, both burned and unburned bone and tooth fragments were found together in or associated with these vessels, indicating that these remains originated from different areas of the temple complex. Similar observations have been made by Wapnish and Hesse (2000: 444) regarding faunal assemblages at Tel Dan, and by Zeuner (1960: 29) at Qumran. The animal parts collected in these bowls were likely intended for disposal.

Since the sacrificial victim was a holy offering, it may have been subject to strictly prescribed methods of discard once the ceremony had concluded. The bones of a sacrificial animal were probably not simply destroyed or even randomly discarded. Rather, they were likely treated with respect and disposed in religiously prescribed rituals (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 35, 41), and it is reasonable to speculate that Philistine cultic practice also observed similarly sanctioned methods of disposal. In any event, given the time and care that was invested in collecting the scraps of bone found in these ceramic bowls, it is unlikely that canids or other scavengers would have had access to the faunal remains consumed in these rituals.

Wapnish and Hesse (2000: 444) have suggested that the microfaunal assemblage at Megiddo was deposited in areas that experienced limited human activity. However, the same reduced level of human activity cannot be assumed for Ekron's temple complex. It was located directly in the heart of the city in a highly active area, and with a heavy traffic flow that probably discouraged the visitation of scavenging animals. It seems more likely that the occurrence of canids and birds of prey took place after the city was deserted, yet prior to the Neo-Babylonian invasion. The duration of this window of opportunity is unclear, but it is assumed to have been short due to the relatively low number of bones from small animals compared to the overall size of the 7th century BCE faunal assemblage. Another reason for the small microfaunal assemblage is that most of the data presented here was collected by hand. There is little doubt that more bones from small animal species are associated with the various soil samples that were taken during excavation. Even a brief occupational hiatus would have provided the opportunity for carnivores and birds of prey to produce the assemblage recovered.

One detail that requires further consideration concerns the date of the small animal remains. The possibility exists that some of these animals are intrusive elements introduced from later or even modern levels. However, Davis (1987: 25–26) and Redding (1978: 65) have outlined useful approaches for distinguishing intrusive remains: variable discoloration, skeletal part representation, proximity of remains to disturbed (burrowed) areas, and stratigraphic position. Animals burrowing down from later levels into ancient deposits can be identified by the appearance of their bones. Their remains generally are of a brighter or lighter color than that seen on an assemblage subjected to the effects of soil chemistry over millennia. In the Tel Mique assemblage, all the small fauna exhibit the same coloration as the rest of the 7th century BCE assemblage, indicating a similar, though not necessarily identical, date of deposition. Intrusive rodents are

sometimes also identified through skeletal completeness. However, complete small animal skeletons were not found in any 7th century BCE loci at Ekron. Intrusive animals often also leave behind traces of their route of travel (e.g., burrow holes, or rodent runs). Their routes of entry are often encountered on archaeological sites and in many cases are evident in profile, allowing one to view the vertical range of the bioturbator. Some burrow holes were recorded in the topsoil that covered the 7th century BCE occupation at Tel Miqne, but none of these appear to have penetrated the Iron Age levels.

However, perhaps the most convincing evidence that confirms the date of the small animal remains (as well as all chewed and digested bone fragments) is their stratigraphic position. Debris dated to the 604 destruction is evident in several areas at Ekron (Gitin 1987: 210; Gitin 1989a: 29, 40; Gitin et al. 1997: 7). Most of the animal bones were found sealed below this layer of destruction debris, and therefore cannot post-date the event. Their stratigraphic context, considered with the other evidence cited above, thus confirms their penecontemporaneous deposition (in relation to the rest of the securely dated fauna in these levels), prior to Ekron's conflagration at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Since the microfaunal remains probably represent meal remnants left by raptors, another reason for dating their deposition prior to the Babylonian destruction should also be considered. Bird pellets collect in places situated beneath their roosts (Hesse and Wapnish 1985: 20). Birds of prey would not have stayed at ground level, as they prefer higher perch locations. Cave or rock shelters are often used in this manner, but wild predators are adaptable and are also known to inhabit deserted buildings (Hesse and Wapnish 1985: 21) and abandoned vehicles (Tores and Yom-Tov 2003: 233). The birds of prey responsible for depositing the small animal bone accumulation at Ekron would have required higher-location perches, presumably in the structures (houses, temple complex, industrial buildings, animal stables, granaries, etc.) left behind by their fleeing owners. Given the level of destruction the city experienced once the Neo-Babylonian army arrived, it seems unlikely that many (if any) structures were left standing. A Neo-Babylonian source describes Ashkelon's destruction as a "mound and heap of ruins" (Malamat 1956: 251). It is not hard to imagine that Ekron would have been left in an equal state of devastation, and that such ruins would not have provided suitable or attractive roosting areas for birds of prey.

The 604 Babylonian Campaign and the Abandonment of Philistine Ekron

Regarding site formation processes in the Levant, O. Bar-Yosef once remarked that "...in the course of the debate concerning the origin of modern humans, the discussion centers on lithics and human fossils alone. In practice, many colleagues exploit these two data sets as the only sources for learning about past patterns of behavior" (1993: 21). Bar-Yosef's observation can also be extended to the study

of the Iron Age southern Levant, where pottery, architecture and texts have understandably drawn the primary focus of academic inquiry. However, zooarchaeological analyses also have much to contribute to the study of this period.

As I have demonstrated, some of the 7th century BCE fauna at Tel Miqne indicate modifications consistent with the feeding habits of raptors and canids. Since small bodied species would have held no economic importance to those living at Ekron, I have argued that their remains were deposited by birds of prey. These remains could not have been introduced during a time when Ekron teemed with human activity, since this would have discouraged birds of prey from roosting nearby. Moreover, the remains of small animals, as well as chewed and partially digested bones from larger species, were found inside Temple Complex 650. As a holy site protected by a patron deity, the temple precinct was the center of religious ritual in the city. The grand design of its construction, the royal dedicatory inscription found inside it, and the rich assemblage of artifacts, all attest to its prominence in the social and religious life of 7th century Ekron. Given these considerations, it is extremely unlikely that scavengers and birds of prey would have been allowed to invade the holy precinct and desecrate it through their bodily discharges. The interpretation that best accounts for this evidence, therefore, is that Ekron was abandoned at the end of the 7th century BCE to avoid a military confrontation with the Neo-Babylonian army.

In light of this, we might speculate about the final days of Philistine Ekron. Before fleeing, its inhabitants may have carried out rituals in their temple for a last attempt to secure divine assistance. Supplies were packed, provisions were secured, and valuables were left behind, hidden in secret locations that individuals noted and fully intended on revisiting for future reclamation. While many items were taken, other possessions were undoubtedly left behind. Not all of the foodstuffs in households, nor all of the sacks and baskets filled with harvest from the nearby fields, could have been taken with them due to considerations of space, weight, and perhaps even time. With a veritable bounty of food, the colonization of a now deserted Ekron by small animals would not have taken long. Rodents attracted to the area by food and shelter, in turn, would have represented food for birds of prey. Canids entering any precinct of the city would have fed on animal parts that were fresh enough to warrant their attention, including the remains of recently sacrificed animals in the temple complex.

The Field Museum

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