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# Isra'el and the Philistines



**The Sea Peoples** seem to have come from the province of Pylos in Greece. The two cities of Pylos, Apekee and Asistia were centers of metalworkers and armaments. Arriving in the Eastern Mediterranean, they assimilated into the native Canaanite population. The **Philistine** material culture lost its uniqueness when **they** reached the peak of **their** prosperity and their political and military power at the end of the eleventh century BC. This period was one in which the older Aegean traditions were abandoned, not only at Ekron, but in the rest of **Philistia**, and new cultural influences, primarily Egyptian and Phoenician, took their place (to see a 25-minute video on the Philistines click **here**).

The Philistines had probably adopted the native Canaanite language for communication in the south right after their settlement. Moreover, it is possible that **the Philistines** had also adopted the fully standardized Phoenician alphabet of twenty-two letters, as the Greeks did around 1100 BC. First, **the Philistines** established three coastal city-states, Gaza, Ashdod, and Ashkelon. Later, Gath and Ekron in the lowland were added to them, thus establishing a pentapolis, a confederation of five city-states in the **Philistine** Plain.

The purpose of **the Philistines** in extending control in Canaan was not only to dominate the native inhabitants and to exact forced labor and taxes, but also to control the vital overland routes by establishing military posts and garrisons **(First Samuel 13:3; Second Samuel 23;14)**. During the period of **the Judges**, **the Philistines** were one of **Isra'el's** major enemies **(Judges 3:3** and **31, 13:5** and **14:4)**. They especially appear in the stories of Sampson **(Judges Chapters**

**14-16)**, which were probably set in the twelfth century. Later, about the middle of the eleventh century BC, **the Philistines** won a major conflict with **Isra'el** during the time of 'Eli (**to see link click Bb – The Philistines Capture the Ark**).

The primary god of **their** pantheon was Dagon, a deity worshiped also in upper Mesopotamia as a grain god. Some scholars suggest that the Philistine Dagon was represented as having a human torso and upper body and a fish's tail (see **Bf – The Ark at Ashdod**). It may well be that the originally seafaring Philistines brought their fish god with them to Canaan and then adapted him to the Semitic god Dagon, because of their need to become a grain-producing people **(Judges 15:3-5)**.

**Samuel and the Philistines:** After capturing the Ark of the Covenant at Ebenezer, **the Philistines** were able to use the road into the Ephraim mountains and secured **their** domination of the Via Maris, or "The Way of **the Philistines**," was the main trade route along the Mediterranean coast. It was the most important trade route from Egypt to Syria, which followed the coastal plain before crossing over into the plain of Jezreel and the Jordan Valley. Then, Samuel was victorious over **the Philistines** near Mizpah in the southern mountains of Ephraim (see **Bm – The Last Judge**). On the historical background of the emergence of the monarchy in **Isra'el** see **Bp – The Request for a King**.

**King Sha'ul and the Philistines:** Before and during the reign of **King Sha'ul**, **the Philistines** established their garrisons at strategic points **(First Samuel 10:5)** and on the main roads **(First Samuel 13:17** and **14:15)**. When necessary, **they** could send a military unit that included chariots, to aid a garrison. In this way, they could control and tax large areas. They could also conscript units from the subjugated population **(First Samuel 14:21)**. However, **Sha'ul** conquered **the Philistine** fortress at Geba in **First Samuel 13:3**, and brought **the Philistine** domination in the territory of **Benjamin** to an end.

At least at the end of the eleventh century BC, **the Philistines** had a monopoly on the process of extracting metals in their pure form. This was especially relevant to their production of chariots and weapons. What **the Philistines** did, however, was to prevent **Israelite** craftsmen from learning those new skills, though presumably **they** continued working in bronze. Thus, **they** subjugated **the Israelites** economically **(First Samuel 13:19-21)**. **The Philistine** military organization and the quality of **their** weapons were superior to those of **the Israelites** (see **Cq – David Kills Goliath**). **The Philistine** material culture was highly developed with well-planned urban centers. It was prosperous, and they increasingly imported

goods from Egypt, Phoenicia, and Cyprus. It may be that **David** learned something of **Philistine** military and administrative techniques during **his** stay in **Gath** (see **the Life of David Aw – David at Gath**) and **Ziklag** (see **the Life of David Bt – Achish Sends David Back to Ziklag**).

**King Sha'ul** seems to have been successful in the hill country, but **his** troops could not win a battle in the open plain because of the domination of **Philistine** chariots. In **First Samuel 23** the war shifted from the mountains to the lowland Shephelah, which was the border between **the Israelite** towns and **Philistia** proper. Then, in **First Samuel Chapters 28** to **31**, **the Philistines** attacked **Isra'el** from bases in the Jezreel Valley on the Via Maris highway and destroyed **the Israelite** army and cornered **King Sha'ul** on Mount Gilboa (see **Dk – Sha'ul Takes His Own Life**).

**David and the Philistines: Achish, son of Maok, the Philistine king of Gath,** employed that ancient tactic of "divide and conquer" by supporting **David** against the House of **Sha'ul** in **Isra'el** (see **the Life of David Bs – David Among the Philistines**). But then, when **David** became king, he was able to defeat **the Philistines** and control territory in the northern plain, the Jezreel Valley, and large sections along the Via Maris. **He** captured the cities of **Dor**, **Megiddo**, and **Beth-Shean**. Thus, **he** broke **the Philistine** military, political, and economic power over **Isra'el**, though **he** could not destroy all the major cities on the southern coast. **He** used mercenaries such as **the Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittities (Second Samuel 15:18)**. All those **peoples** were either **Philistine** or closely related Aegean groups. Those **Philistines** were certainly "uncircumcised," but **they** were not the uncivilized or unsophisticated **people** that medieval Europe once thought **them** to be. They had a highly developed technology and civilization when **Sha'ul** and **David** confronted **them** around the eleventh and tenth centuries BC.[7]