Where Did the Philistines Come From?

_Horned altar from Tell es-Safi hints at the origins of the Philistines_

The excavations at Tell es-Safi/Gath, the site of Gath of the Philistines mentioned in the Bible (e.g., 1 Samuel 6:17), have produced many fascinating finds,* and the summer of 2011 was no exception.

While uncovering an impressive destruction level dating to the second half of the ninth century B.C.E., when Gath was the largest of the five cities of the Philistines and perhaps the largest city in the Land of Israel during the Iron Age, excavators found an exceptionally well preserved horned altar reminiscent of the Israelite horned altars described in the Bible (Exodus 27:1–2; 1 Kings 1:50). Had it not been for a stroke of luck, the horned altar may never have been discovered. Like most archaeological digs, the Tell es-Safi/Gath excavation leaves unexcavated “balks” between the excavation squares, thereby allowing easier access to the squares as well as providing a profile view of the excavated layers. In the winter of 2010/2011, however, strong rainstorms caused some of the balks to collapse.

When the team came back to the field in July 2011, one of their first priorities was to clean up and straighten the collapsed balks. As they cleaned one of the balks in Area D (in the lower city), they came upon an unusually shaped stone object just 10 inches below the surface. Work was immediately stopped as they probed further, and, lo and behold, one of the horns of the altar appeared. Once they realized what they had discovered, the team began the slow, delicate process of excavating the entire horned altar.

The horned altar stands nearly 3.5 feet high and measures just over 1.5 feet on each side. These dimensions more or less match the dimensions given in the Bible (Exodus 30:2) for the Israelite incense altar of the Tabernacle (though this altar shows no signs of having been used to burn incense). Moreover, the decorative features of the altar, including its horns and the groove and raised band of the base, are similar to Israelite altars described in the Bible (Exodus 27:2), as well as other Iron Age altars that have been found throughout the southern Levant.

But why does this altar have only two horns, when we know from the Bible and excavated examples that the altars of both the Israelites and, later, the Philistines, typically had four horns?**

The fact that the Tell es-Safi/Gath horned altar has only two horns may have to do with the cultural origins of the Philistines. As Louise Hitchcock, senior staff member of the Tell es-Safi/Gath excavations, has suggested, the very motif of the horned altar in the Levant may have been influenced...
by earlier Minoan “horns of consecration,” symbolic representations of the horns of the sacred bull in Minoan culture. In fact, there is an altar from the Late Bronze Age site of Myrtous Pigadhes in Cyprus that also has only two horns. The unique horned altar from Tell es-Safi/Gath, the earliest stone altar ever found from the land of the Philistines, may be another indication of the Aegean influences on early Philistine culture and quite possibly a hint to their origins.


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