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"Sea Peoples" on Tall Zarʿā in Northern Jordan?: Material Culture, Cult, and Political Power Far Away from the Mediterranean Cities

Over the last century, the "Sea Peoples" have repeatedly found themselves in the focus of archaeological research. Yet, to this day, this phenomenon presents scholars with riddles: Who were they? Where did they come from? Which groups constituted them? Did these groups show similarities and ally with each other, or did they merely happen to coincide in the same place and time? What roles did these groups play in the collapse of Late Bronze Age society in Syria and Palestine? Many of these questions are still not solved (Killebrew and Lehmann 2013: 5).

The term itself presents some difficulties. Cuneiform texts from Mari and Ugarit, from the Middle Bronze Age, report Aegean traders and craftsmen who were sent from town to town. Egyptian sources mention "peoples of the sea" two centuries before the end of the Late Bronze Age—Merneptah and Ramses III describe them as invaders who penetrated Egypt via both sea and land routes and later served as mercenaries and soldiers in the Egyptian army (for a discussion of the "Sea Peoples" in primary sources, see Adams and Cohen 2013: 645–664; Kitchen 2003: 2–10; Kopanias 2017: 119–134).

In addition to archaeological findings and iconographic elements on image carriers such as reliefs and seals, written sources also contribute to the reconstruction of history. However, these come from different genres, deal with a wide variety of topics, and are often written with a specific intention for a specific audience. For the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age in the southern Levant, Egyptian and Mesopotamian as well as indigenous texts can be consulted. The biblical accounts also represent a source, although here—as with any source—interpretation is necessary and the reminder that no source objectively represents a picture of reality.

Individual groups of those later classified as "Sea Peoples" already appeared in the time of Pharaoh Amenophis III, on cuneiform tablets found in Tall Al ʿAmārnah from the 14th century BC, among them the Sherden (*šrdn*). The most significant source on "Sea Peoples", however, is provided by Ramses III's funerary temple in Medinet Habu (FIG. 1), dating from the 12th century BC. Two large depictions and accompanying texts described the victory of the Pharaoh both by sea and by land (FIG. 2) over various groups "from the north" and "from the sea"—victories over the Peleset (*plst*), the Tjekker (*tkr*), the Shekelesh (*šklš*), the Denyen (*dnjn*), and the Weshesh (*wšš*).

These descriptions prompted researchers to develop the concept of an "invasion of the Sea Peoples," made up of Aegean warriors under whose might not only the Hittite Empire and Cyprus but also the entire Middle East supposedly collapsed. Today it is generally presumed that the concept is a modern fabrication and that the phenomenon can be traced back to Egyptian war propaganda, which conflated these very diverse groups, of which otherwise little or nothing is known, under the blanket term of "Sea Peoples" (general overviews of written sources: Dothan 1982: 1–24; Noort 1994: 27–112; Ehrlich 1996; Adams and Cohen 2013; see also: Redford 2000: 8; Knapp 2021: 60).

The traditional image of the "Sea Peoples" pertains to their advance into the Levant around 1200BC, by ship and over land, which saw them successfully vanquish the city states along the Eastern Mediterranean coastline to eventually settle in the southwestern coastal plain, in the "lands of the Philistines" (*e.g.*, Faust and Lev-Tov 2011. On the following see also Maeir and Hitchcock 2017: 149–150). Their Aegean culture soon merged with their local ("Canaanite") surroundings. In 711BC the Assyrian king Sargon II made their lands, Philistia, an Assyrrian province, and the "Philistines" eventually disappeared into the murky depths of history by the time of the Babylonian rule in the region (thus summarized in Maeir 2019: 151–152; Dothan 1982; Faust and Lev-Tov 2011: 14–27; see also the summarized state of research of the 1990s in Noort 1994, especially 179–185). The palace of the Assyrian king Sargon II depicted the conquest of two Philistine cities. It is significant that the Philistines are depicted as different in their clothing and armament from the Judeans (Noort 1994: 33); that is, they formed entities that were still distinct from one another.

The Philistines in the Pentapolis

The Peleset (the Philistines) traditionally enjoyed particular attention in historical research because of their appearance in biblical texts. Although compiled in retrospect, these are our most important sources for reconstructing the history of the "Sea Peoples" in the southern Levant. According to the Bible, these people inhabited the southern coastal strip, the Pentapolis: to wit, the union of five cities that consisted of GHazzah (Gaza), ʿAsqalān (Ashkelon), Asdūd (Ashdod), Tall Aṣ Ṣāfī (Gat), and ʿAqrūn or KHirbat Al Muqannaʿ (Tall Miqne). It was therefore not surprising that archaeological research focused on these cities first. Even in this region, the excavation results for these cities of the Philistine core region revealed the material culture to be too diverse to speak of a uniform, let alone ethnically defined, group.

Other cities outside of the Pentapolis were also the subject of research, such as Tall Al Qasīlah (Tall Qasile), north of modern-day Tel Aviv, a new

foundation by the "Sea Peoples" dating from the Early Iron Age. Philistine cultural influences from the Early Iron Age were also found in Tall Al Baṭash (Timna near Ekron), as well as in the temple of Nahal Pattisch (Mazar 1993: 1207–1210; Mazar 1997; Mazar and Kelm 1993: 153; Meiberg and Nashshoni 2020: 297).

The archaeological record indicates that the Philistines quickly merged with resident native Canaanites, incorporated Egyptian influences, while still retaining many of their own distinct traditions. They consumed considerable amounts of pork, wherefore they also imported their own (European) species of domesticated pigs into the Levant (Jung 2017: 25; Meiri *et al.* 2013: 6; Meiri et al. 2017: 1–10; Hesse 1990; Hesse and Wapnish 1997). Between 2013 and 2016, the first burial ground that could be ascribed to the Philistines was excavated in Ashkelon. Preliminary reports already suggest that their DNA showed differences to the indigenous population (Feldman *et al.* 2019).

Invaders, Pirates, Immigrants or New Settlers?

The image of the "Sea Peoples" has changed in research but without, however, the attainment of any conclusive clarity. Especially the research into the Pentapolis and the Philistines revealed that some urban centers (such as Tall Miqne/Ekron) were seized by force, while others (such as Ashkelon) experienced peaceful transitions. As a result, the image of warriors conquering cultivated lands thus shifted towards one of new settlers who were nevertheless able to defend themselves. Particularly popular are perceptions propagating the arrival of hardened pirates or droves of immigrants (themselves refugees), depending on the situation the respective interpreter of the events found themselves in.

From the beginning of this research, it seems to have always been a question of point of view as well as society. While in the Victorian era the advance of the "Sea Peoples" was still seen positively (a superior race naturally seeks new living space and defeats inferior peoples), this view changed at the end of the 19th century and again in the course of World War I; the "Sea Peoples" were increasingly viewed as invaders, barbarians who fell upon other countries in a "Sea Peoples Storm" (summarized in Silberman 1998; for more recent theories see also Yasur-Landau 2010: 10, 2017: 146; Gilboa and Sharon 2017: 285; Knapp 2021).

Cultural Markers

One archaeological approach to the closer determination of historical groups is based on the presence or absence of certain markers. Archaeological cultures are determined on the basis of a recognizable distribution pattern, *i.e.*, specific entities determined by a variety of defined diagnostic types. This "culture space approach" developed a binary principle of presence *vs.* absence, which led to the "pots-and-peoples" discussion. In this, the finding of a certain type of pottery was seen as an ethnic indicator of the presence of a certain population group and, by extension, a certain ethnic group. This approach has been fundamentally criticized and the general informative value of distribution patterns has been contested. A more recent social constructionist perspective on identity rejects essentialist views as singular or unitary and emphasizes, on the one hand, the fluid and changing nature of identity constructions and, on the other, different identity categories such as race, gender, class, or religion (see Berlejung 2019: 254–256). "Pots-and-people" became "different cultural spheres/different cultural assemblages":

if the immigrant group comes from a distinctly different cultural milieu than the recipient culture, the new assemblage of material culture can be expected to be distinctly different from and distinct from the native background. Therefore, the culture of the immigrant group is best traced in the initial phase and will adapt or disappear altogether over time (Bunimowitz and Yasur-Landau 1996: 89).

Markers (such as locally produced Mycenaean IIIC:1 pottery or Aegean loom weights, as well architecture that bears hallmarks of Aegean styles) are usually employed to trace the "Sea Peoples" in excavation findings. Of course, these objects or buildings might also have been adopted by natives who drew inspiration from the "Sea Peoples." This necessitates a certain degree of caution. The appearance of such markers in specific locations does not directly point towards the presence of certain ethnic groups. Their identity was complex and is difficult to grasp in archaeological findings. However, a combination of various "markers" (such as pottery, unfired loom weights, dog bones, metal manufacturing, newly introduced plants and technologies) more clearly suggests the influence of non-local groups within the population (a summary presentation with further literature: Maeir 2021: 110–115).

Consequently, it is impossible to eliminate the possibility of these new arrivals being allied Egyptians. The Egyptian administration reached far beyond the Yarmuk River (stele of Seti I on the Tall Ash SHihāb). This stele was found by G.A. Smith (Smith 1901: 347), but Albright was unable to retrieve it, and its whereabouts are unclear (Albright 1935: 16). With regard to the areas of the Jordan Valley and Transjordan in particular, groups such as the Sherden (*šrdn*) come into view, who served as soldiers and mercenaries in the Egyptian army and were deployed in garrisons outside of Egypt.

Philistines outside of the "Lands of the Philistines"?

The biblical descriptions also point towards the presence of "Sea Peoples" outside of the Pentapolis. They speak of Saul's fight against the Philistines on Mount Faqqūʿah (Mount Gilboa), who would go on to bring his dead body to Bet-Shean (1 Samuel 31). The Israelites fought the Ammonites and Philistines even in eastern Transjordan, in Jilʿād (Gilead) (Judges 10). The tradition that the Israelites were defeated here and the Philistines took over their cities can be regarded as pointing to a proof of their presence in the Marj Ibn ʿĀmir (Jezreel) and the Jordan Valley retained in universal historical memory. For a detailed list and discussion of the biblical sources on the Philistines, see Ehrlich 1996: 105–166 and Dothan 1993: 53.

What is surprising about this story at first glance is the location of the battle at Mount Faqqūʿah (Mount Gilboa), far outside the biblically reported heartland of the Philistines. Since the overall outline of the narrative must have been plausible when it was written, in order to credibly convey the theological message, it must be assumed that at least at one time in history there was a Philistine presence in Baysān (Beth Shean) and the Upper Jordan Valley/in Transjordan (see also Stern 2013: 1.6–7). It is likely that all these foreign, non-integrated groups of "Sea Peoples" were referred to simply as "Philistines" by the writers of the Old Testament. Their respective histories had been lost and could no longer be distinguished (Zwickel 2017: 347).

The Jordan Valley

The hypothesis that groups of the "Sea Peoples" settled in the Jordan Valley

in the 13th to 12th centuries BC was raised early on (Pritchard 1968: 100–110). This can potentially explain some peculiarities, such as the strong Aegean influence and close contact to the coastal plain in Tall Dayr 'Allā (Sukkot), for instance, as well as some other characteristics such as burials conducted in double pithoi, which were otherwise unusual in this area. There is a lack of Philistine bichrome pottery in these locations (Kafafi 2009: 51–53), but the bichrome pottery could, however, be found in neighboring sites. Therefore, a reevaluation of the pottery (figurines, cultic objects, and looms weight), as well as the architecture (temples, crafting and cooking areas) is urgently needed in these places, some of which were excavated decades ago. In recent years, this form of reevaluation has yielded traces of non-local influences in the culture of the Late Bronze Age in the Jordan Valley, especially in Ṯabaqat Faḥl (Pella), Tall Dayr 'Allā, Tall As Sa'īdiyyah, Tall Abū Al KHaraz, as well as Tall Zar'ā (Tubb 2000; Bourke 1997, 2007; Bürge-Fischer 2016; Bürge 2017; Green 2006: 82–83; Kafafi 2009; Soennecken forthcoming) (FIG. 3).

Already under Ramses III the Egyptians had lost their complete control of the highlands and the plateau east of the Jordan and were forced to concentrate their attention on the Jordan Valley (garrison in Baysān "Bet-Shean") and the trade routes with Tall Zar'ā (Van der Steen 2004: 66). From Ramses III at the latest, the Egyptians were forced to retreat as far as Baysān (Bet-Shean) and could only maintain military bases along the trade routes (on this see: Dijkstra *et al.* 2005: 186).

Tall Zar'ā as the Key to Our Understanding

The Tall Zar'ā, excavated from 2001 onwards as part of the Gadara Region Project under the directorship of Prof. Dr. Dr. Dr. h.c. Dieter Vieweger and Dr. Jutta Häser, occupies a central strategic position in the surrounding area, where Wādī Al 'Arab and Wādī Zaḥar meet. The *tall*, mentioned in Egyptian reports of military campaigns as *qa/gá-da-ra*, was also positioned at an important trade route, which originated in Egypt, progressed along the Mediterranean coast, and led via Tall Al Mutasallim (Megiddo) and the *tall* towards Damascus and farther into Mesopotamia. Along this trade route, the Egyptians secured their influence with military force, for which they seemingly also employed groups belonging to the "Sea Peoples." Tall Zar'ā offers decisive clues for changes in its demographic structure towards the end of the Late Bronze Age. Many things point towards the arrival of non-indigenous people, probably bringing an Aegean influence with them.

One example of this influence is in the southern room of a tower in the western city walls in Stratum 14 a (*ca.* 1200BC) (FIG. 4), which saw the addition of a sanctuary (2) and penetralia (1). In the courtyard (3) a very atypical area was found, with sherds covering the area of an altar (4), which allows for comparisons with similar findings in Baysān (Bet-Shean), Tall Aṣ Ṣāfī/Gat, and Tall Al Qaṣīlah. This is accompanied by further indicators the origins of which can only be determined by another analysis of pottery finds, a detailed examination of metal findings, and an isotopic analysis of animal bones. The "Orpheus Jar" was found in the converted complex bordering the temple to the south (FIGS. 5 and 6). In terms of manufacture and iconography, this vessel can be compared to pottery from the southern coastal plains (Lyre-Player from Asdūd (Ashdod), pottery from Asdūd (Ashdod), Tall Al Jazar

(Gezer), and the painted cup from Tall Al Mutasallim (Megiddo) that was classified as "Philistine."

This complex had relatively frequent finds of pig bones (>20%) when compared to the other living quarters. An evaluation of the aDNA of the pig bones will be carried out in cooperation with Prof. Ben Krause-Kyora from Kiel University in the next few years. Even if an "ethnic" classification cannot take place on the basis of pig bones, an increased occurrence does suggest changed eating habits. Since food preparation and eating habits in particular are often retained by immigrants even when they are otherwise trying to assimilate into their new cultural environment, these areas are promising for evaluation (see for this Jung 2017: 25; Hesse 1990; Hesse and Wapnish 1997).

Additionally, a remarkable number of bronze items and weapons was found at Tall Zaʿā. The architecture of the complex resembled more an Aegean corridor house than a Levantine courtyard house. Stratum 13 (Early Iron Age) also showed the more frequent occurrence of bronze items and (locally produced) Mycenaean pottery. While fill layers of other living quarters showed proportions of pig bones well below 5%, the fill layers here contained up to 70% pig bones.

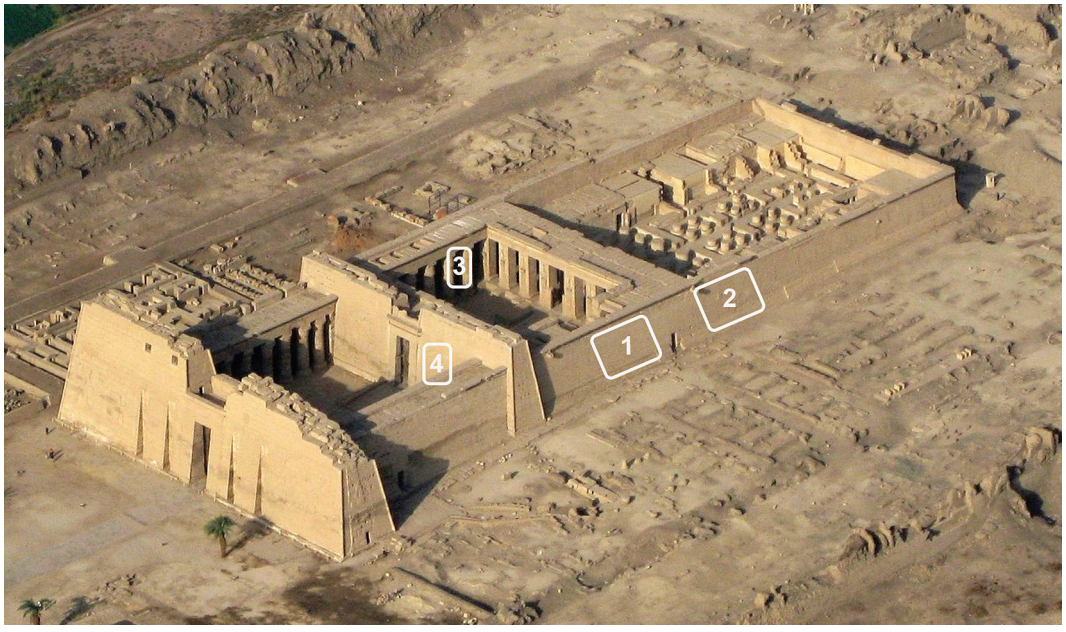
A possible scenario that explains the findings at the Tall Zaʿā would be that Seti I settled here mercenaries who were made up of members of the "Sea Peoples" to secure the area at the end of the Late Bronze Age (and at the threshold of Iron Age I). Once the Egyptian influence over the area of Jilʿād (Gilead) was ultimately lost, and was also waning in the Jordan Valley, the settled "Sea Peoples" (craftsmen, traders, or former Egyptian mercenaries?) appear to have entered into an alliance with the city kingdom, settled there, and erected a temple. Jilʿād (Gilead)'s ruler might have been drawn to their technical expertise and trade connections; or potentially the prospect of having trained mercenaries to defend his city was enticing enough. A less consensual scenario can of course be constructed too: the "Sea Peoples" might have utilized the arising power vacuum to gain control of the city, previously under Egyptian rule, by establishing their own elites.

How can the riddle surrounding these people be solved? What sets them apart from the indigenous population? Assuming the immigrants brought their customs, traditions, and habits with them, material traces of these activities, cults, and celebrations should be detectable in various areas: Certain pottery shapes proved useful for the preparation of a familiar and popular dish and were produced in the traditional way even in their new home (use of cooking jars instead of cooking pots). Familiar eating habits were also retained and can be traced in waste materials and animal bones (*e.g.*, pig consumption). Personal items such as weapons or jewelry were also produced in the new surroundings, as "authentically" as possible. The architecture, especially with regard to cultic buildings, was also influenced by proven techniques or incorporated familiar elements. With regard to burials, the customs appeared to have been particularly conservative: here the connection to old customs and gods was of decisive significance.

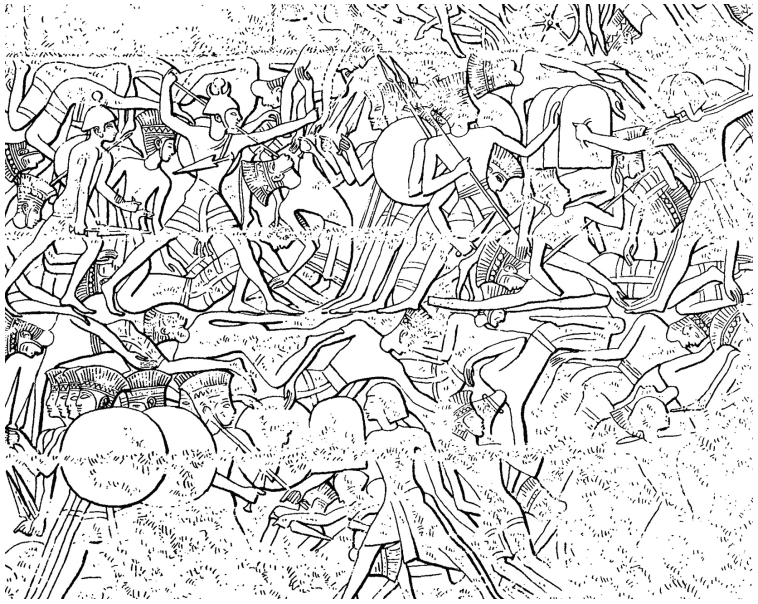
Summary

Over the last century, research has shown that the phenomenon of the "Sea Peoples" is difficult to grasp. The complex system of such a "multi-cultural society" requires the analysis of these rather disparate non-indigenous influences in order to comprehend the heterogeneous structure of these groups,

which were only brought together under *one* name in retrospect. These are the questions and analyses that will be addressed by the author's research of Tall Zar'ā and the area of the Jordan Valley in the coming years.

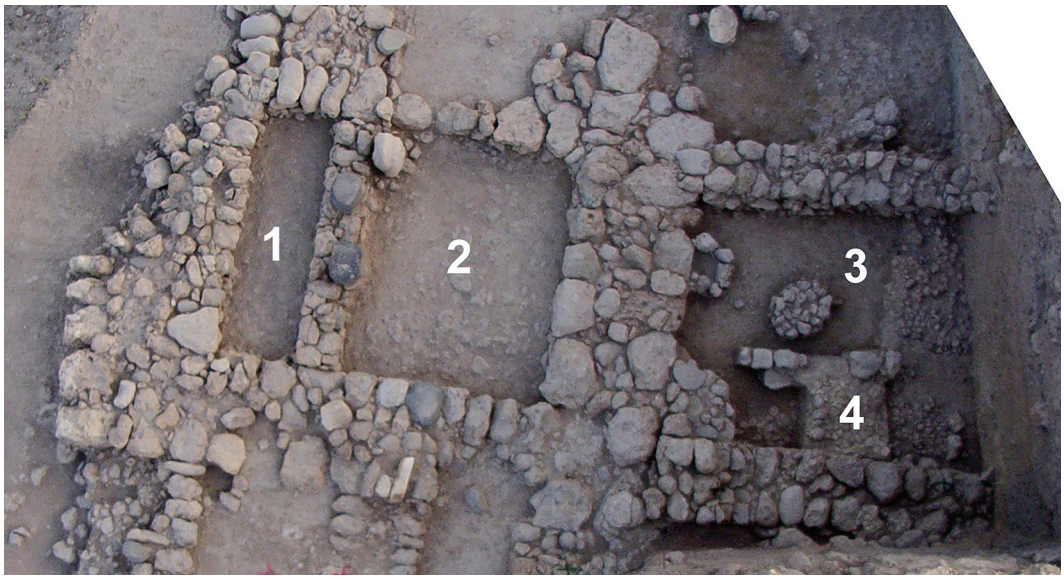


1. Temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu. Reliefs and texts: 1) land battle; 2) sea battle; 3) inscription from the 5th year of his reign; 4) inscription from the 8th year of his reign (photo by Steve D.E. Cameron, CC BY 3.0 [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en]; edited by K. Soennecken).



2. Detail of the land battle between the forces of Ramsses III and the "Sea Peoples" (from Breasted 1930: pl. 32).

3. Map of the southern Levant with selected Late Bronze Age sites (image by K. Soennecken).



4. Tower sanctuary in Stratum 14: 1) penetralia; 2) cella; 3) the preceding courtyard, including sherd scatter; and 4) altar (photo copyright Biblisch Archäologisches Institut/Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes).

5. "Orpheus" jar from Tall Zar'ā (photos copyright Biblisch Archäologisches Institut/Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes).

6. Detail of the "Orpheus" jar from Tall Zar'ā (photo copyright Biblisch Archäologisches Institut/Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes).

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