The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction

By Lawrence E. Stager

Sidebar: Ashkelon: An International City

Sidebar: The Zooarchaeological Record: Pigs’ Feet, Cattle Bones and Birds’ Wings

Sidebar: The Epigraphical Record: A Philistine Ostracon from Ashkelon

Carl Andrews, Leon Levy Expedition

“Nebuchadrezzar marched to the city of Ashkelon” and “turned the city into ... heaps of ruins,” according to the cuneiform Babylonian Chronicle. The vitrified brick, crushed pottery and charcoal found throughout the city suggest the terror of the Babylonian destruction.

Two superpowers dominated the Near East in the late seventh century B.C.E.: in the East, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which extended control over Syria after Assyria’s decline; in the West, Egypt, which dominated the southern Levant. In 605 B.C.E., Babylon pushed west; the newly crowned King Nebuchadrezzar II won a decisive battle against the Egyptians at Carchemish on the upper Euphrates. The next year he moved south, capturing and burning the Philistine seaport of Ashkelon.

The ferocity of the Babylonians is amply demonstrated by the archaeological evidence. Fires swept through the city’s winery (where the photo was taken), leaving remnants of charred wood; brick and pottery were melted into glass;
ceramic jars were smashed and strewn helter skelter. So widely known was the destruction of Ashkelon that the prophet Jeremiah wrote that Babylon rose out of the north “to destroy all the Philistines ... Ashkelon is silenced” (Jeremiah 47:4–5).

In 586 B.C.E. Nebuchadrezzar (also known as Nebuchadnezzar II), king of Babylon, attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and burned the city. This of course is the focal point of the Biblical story. For Nebuchadrezzar, however, Jerusalem was only one of many prizes, part of a major military operation in the West extending over many years. The real battle was between two superpowers—the newly ascendant Babylonian Empire in the East (replacing the Assyrians) and Egypt in the West. Hebrew University professor Avraham Malamat has aptly applied the term “bipolar politics” to this contest.¹

By the last half of the seventh century B.C.E., Egypt dominated neighboring countries like Philistia and Judah (the northern kingdom of Israel having already been destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E.).

The Babylonian campaigns (609–586 B.C.E.)

Green line: Nabopolassar’s campaigns (609–605 B.C.E.)
Purple line: Nebuchadrezzar II’s campaigns (605–601 B.C.E.)
Red line: Nebuchadrezzar II’s campaigns (599–586 B.C.E.)

During the reigns of Pharaoh Psamtik I (664–610 B.C.E.) and his son Necho II (610–595 B.C.E.), Egypt moved into the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Assyria from the West. For four decades Egypt held sway over former Assyrian provinces as far north as Megiddo (Magiddu).² Referring to this mortal engagement between East and West, between Babylonia and Egypt, the prophet Jeremiah rebuked Judah in the harshest terms for allying itself with Egypt. Philistia made the same mistake.

In 605 B.C.E., as crown prince and field commander, Nebuchadrezzar led Babylonian troops in a critical battle with the Egyptians under Pharaoh Necho II at Carchemish on the Euphrates River, in what is today western Syria. A decisive Babylonian victory emboldened Nebuchadrezzar, now king, to move south. (It was to this Babylonian victory that the prophet Jeremiah referred when he predicted that Judah too would be devastated by Nebuchadrezzar [Jeremiah 25:8–11]; the stamp of the battle of Carchemish is also seen in explicit references in Jeremiah 46:2–6.)

After Carchemish, the new king campaigned throughout most of 604 B.C.E., right into the winter when the rains
begin, sometimes falling in torrents. Ordinarily, nobody would think of conducting military operations—especially campaigns so dependent on horse and chariot—during the rainy season. But late in 604 B.C.E. Nebuchadrezzar decided to strike at the primary seaport of the Philistines—Ashkelon. At least that is what we are told in the fragmentary *Babylonian Chronicle* written in cuneiform:

(Nebuchadrezzar) marched to the city of Ashkelon and captured it in the month of Kislev (November/December). He captured its king and plundered it and carried off [spoil from it ... ]. He turned the city into a mound (Akkadian *ana tili*, literally a tell) and heaps of ruins ...³

Usually, when an ancient city was besieged, the gates and fortifications were the first features to come under attack. If the assault on these fortifications was successful, the defenders normally surrendered and the rest of the city was spared.⁴ That was not what happened at Ashkelon, however, according to Nebuchadrezzar’s version of events. For his description to be accurate, Nebuchadrezzar’s armies must have advanced far into the interior of the city and reduced this major metropolis to a heap of ruins—in other words, made it a tell.

The Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon has given us an opportunity to test the accuracy of the Babylonian ruler’s account. It has also provided us with a detailed still life of a Philistine metropolis in the late seventh century B.C.E., on the eve of Nebuchadrezzar’s vaunted destruction of the city.

As a seaport (after 11 seasons of terrestrial excavations and 4 of underwater exploration, we have found anchors and ballast from several shipwrecks; however, we are still searching for the harbor), Ashkelon provides evidence of diverse international influence. Phoenician Red-Slipped Ware is abundant, as is its locally made version. (This pottery is most abundant at Philistine sites on the Mediterranean coast—Ashkelon and Ashdod—and is significantly rarer at contemporaneous sites on the inner coastal plain, such as Ekron [Tel Miqne] and Timnah [Tel Batash].)

Cargoes from Phoenician ports such as Tyre arrived in Ashkelon loaded with elegant bowls and cups of Phoenician Fine Ware, including so-called Samaria Ware as well as red- and cream-polished table ware, the latter imitating ivory or alabaster. The prophet Jeremiah was an insightful observer of the geopolitics of his day in referring to Philistia as the “helper” of Tyre and Sidon (Jeremiah 47:4). A special trading relationship between Philistia and Phoenicia, known as *hÉubuhr*, has been inferred from the 11th-century B.C.E. Egyptian “Tale of Wenamon.”⁵ Such trading agreements persisted into the late seventh century B.C.E., and it is to those agreements that Jeremiah alludes.

Phoenician (and perhaps Philistine) ships also brought amphoras and fine wares from Ionia, the Greek islands, Corinth and Cyprus. Elegant wine pitchers (*oinochoai*) decorated with wild goats, stags, and geese arrived from East Greece. Ionian drinking cups (*skyphoi*) were also on board.

At Ashkelon, commerce and religion apparently marched hand in hand. We found an ostraca, a potsherd with writing on it, used as a receipt in a room with smashed jars, charred wheat, weights and a scale balance. On top of this rubble was the collapsed roof of the building, which consisted of reed-impressed and mat-impressed clay. Sitting on top of the roof debris was a small incense altar (without horns) made of sandstone and used to offer incense, such as myrrh and frankincense, to Philistine deities.
Mudbrick towers protected Ashkelon’s 10,000–12,000 inhabitants along a mile-and-a-half arc. The Philistine city’s defenses consisted of as many as 50 towers, evenly spaced along a mudbrick fortification wall built on top of artificial ramparts—made of a thick sheath of sand, soil and debris—surrounding the city. These earthen ramparts, known as glacis construction, were originally built by Canaanites in about 2000 B.C.E.; they were then rebuilt in Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E.) by the Philistines, when these towers were also constructed.

This is the first time anyone has found stratified evidence for rooftop altars. In his catalogue of Judah’s sins, Jeremiah lists rooftop rituals such as incense offerings, and wine and oil libations, in worship of pagan deities. He declares that the “Chaldeans [Babylonians] who are fighting against this city [Jerusalem] shall come, set it on fire, and burn it, with the houses on whose roofs offerings have been made to Baal and libations have been poured out to other gods, to provoke me [Yahweh] to anger” (Jeremiah 32:29). Jeremiah obviously knew what he was talking about, and we now have an example of a rooftop altar from Ashkelon.

The “streets” of Ashkelon are mentioned in David’s lament over the deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:20). The Hebrew word הָעַשִּׁיָּהּ (hûšîyāh), however, does not mean “streets” but “bazaars”; David warns the
Israelites not to proclaim the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in the famous bazaars of Israel's enemy, lest Philistine women rejoice at Israel's loss of its royalty.

The photo looks west toward the sea, along Ashkelon’s marketplace. The main street runs toward the sea just to the right of the large hole (the 1921 British excavation probe) in the foreground; to the left of the street is the Administrative Center (no longer visible because the excavators have dug below it), and to the right are the shops. Beyond the shops, just past the small hole at right center, is the Plaza—an open square. To the left of the far end of the Plaza is the Counting House; some of its rooms are visible in the photo. In the Counting House excavators found an ostracon (an inscribed potsherd) that was used as a receipt for a shipment of grain.

Plan of the Ashkelon marketplace.

Egyptian influence, both commercial and religious, has been documented far beyond our expectations. Among the Egyptian artifacts we found were barrel jars and tripod stands made of Nile clay and a jewelry box made of abalone shell, in which a necklace of Egyptian (or Phoenician) amulets found nearby had once been kept. But there were also Egyptian religious items found in a building we identified as a winery. A bronze statuette of Osiris lay near a cache of seven bronze bottles (situlae). A procession of Egyptian deities in relief files around the bottles. In the midst of the cache of bronze bottles was a bronze votive offering table engraved with what appears to be a loaf of bread flanked by libation flasks. Two baboons sit at opposite corners of the offering table. At another corner sits a falcon; a jackal crouches at the fourth corner. Between the jackal and the falcon is a frog. The most prominent deity represented on the situlae is Min or Amen-Re, with erect phallus. Although not especially clear from this example, from other statues of Min we can interpret what is happening here: The god masturbates with his left hand and raises his right hand in a gesture of joy or pleasure. In Egyptian creation myths, divine masturbatory semen provides the initial life-giving force from which all other generative power derives. These bronze bottles probably contained offerings of actual semen or liquids, such as milk or water, symbolic of this revivifying fluid.

A “twin” of our bronze Osiris statuette was uncovered more than 60 years ago in a small salvage excavation at
Ashkelon. The excavator, J.H. Iliffe, dated it to the fourth century B.C.E., but it is now clear that this statuette and 25 other bronze statuettes of Egyptian deities, as well as 14 other Egyptian bronze artifacts (including cube-shaped weights) found in Iliffe’s excavation were contemporaneous with our bronzes—that is, late seventh century B.C.E., not fourth century B.C.E.

**Carl Andrews, Leon Levy Expedition**

Terracotta figurines, originally 4–5 inches in height, were uncovered from the rubble of Ashkelon’s destruction. Although the excavators do not yet know the name of the deity shown, a silver plaque of the Syrian goddess Ishtar/Ashtarte, the “Queen of Heaven,” has been found at Ekron; the goddess Asherah is attested on seventh-century ostraca from Ekron as well.

What were all these Egyptian artifacts doing at Ashkelon? Very probably there was an Egyptian enclave there with its own sanctuary.
Fat-bellied jars, such as the four largest vessels in the photo, were used by Philistines for fermenting and storing wine. As a port and trading center, Ashkelon was visited by ships from various places in the eastern Mediterranean, such as Phoenicia to the north: Cargo-laden ships from Sidon and Tyre arrived in Ashkelon with goods stored in ceramic jars—like the curving tapered jar at far right and the amphora in front of it. At lower left is an example of the distinctive Philistine Red-Slipped Ware. The inverted bowl combines the form of Assyrian-style pottery (characterized by a sharp shoulder and flaring rim) with the decoration of Phoenician Fine Ware (characterized by a burnished red slip and a reserve pattern resembling so-called Samaria Ware).

The building in which these Egyptian artifacts were found was in the center of the city. Three rooms in this monumental building contained wine presses, hence our designation of the building as a winery. The winery platforms, vats and basins were lined with cobblestones and coated with smooth, shell-tempered plaster of unusually high quality. The best preserved wine press had a shallow plastered platform (where the grapes were pressed by foot) with a low rim on all four sides; the rim on one side had a small hole through which the grape juice flowed into a channel leading to an intermediate-sized plastered tank or vat. Another channel drained the juice into a deeper plastered vat, with a small sump or catchment in the corner. Juice from Ashkelon’s wine presses was decanted into wine jars and left to ferment in adjacent storerooms. Dipper juglets and fat-bellied storage jars (amphoras) with pointed bases and protruding handles were the predominant pottery types found in the winery.

Lina Chesak

A sailor’s paradise. Fine wines probably accounted for a good part of Ashkelon’s international allure, along with products from the interior, such as olive oil. Three rooms in one large building contained wine presses consisting of carefully constructed platforms, vats and basins. Built of cobblestones, the presses were coated with an impermeable layer of fine shell-tempered plaster. At the highest level rested the platform where grapes were pressed by foot; the juice then flowed into a channel leading to settling vats, from which it flowed into other channels emptying into larger basins. From the basins, the juice was collected in jars, fermented and sold.
Three rooms in one large building contained wine presses consisting of carefully constructed platforms, vats and basins (see drawing, which is modeled on a different wine press from the one shown here).

We also found in this building dozens and dozens of puzzling unbaked clay balls, some as large as grapefruits, with a single perforation through the center. At first we thought they might be loom weights for weaving. Since wine-making is a seasonal activity that takes place during and after the grape harvest in August/September, perhaps the building was used for weaving during other seasons. But many of these clay balls are too large and heavy to be loom weights.

Dozens of clay balls, found in the winery, posed a dilemma for the excavators. What were they? Most likely, they are wine-jar stoppers. The clay balls fit easily into the mouths of fat-bellied storage jars. Plugging the jars during fermentation, the stoppers allowed the build-up of gases to be released at regular intervals through their perforations.
Dozens of clay balls, found in the winery, some as large as grapefruits, posed a dilemma for the excavators. What were they? Because the balls were perforated through their centers, it was thought that they might have been loom weights, used to anchor threads while weaving. After the wine-making season of August/September, perhaps, the winery was turned into a weaving center.

More likely, however, they are wine-jar stoppers. The clay balls fit easily into the mouths of fat-bellied storage jars (see photograph). Plugging the jars during fermentation, the stoppers allowed the build-up of gases to be released at regular intervals through their perforations.

The more probable explanation connects them to wine production: They fit nicely into the mouth of the fat-bellied storage jar, the most common Philistine wine jar found at Ashkelon. When wine ferments, it gives off gases. To prevent explosions, the gases are released, sometimes through a bunghole in the side of the wine jar or cask. Of course, a puncture in the side of a pottery vessel damages it permanently. The same effect, without damaging the vessel, could be obtained if perforated stoppers, such as these clay spheres, were sealed in the mouth of the jar, and the hole opened or closed at the appropriate time to release the gases. Israeli archaeologist Zvi Gal was the first to propose the function of these clay balls, which he found in an excavation at Hurvat Rosh Zayit, and we think he is right. If the clay spheres are not loom weights, then there is no reason for us to believe that the winery was converted into a textile factory during the off-season.
The finished wines were served in a so-called “beer-jug” (similar to the earlier example shown here). Nothing could be further from the truth than the image of the Philistines as loutish, beer-guzzling thugs. Not only was their craftsmanship superb, but they drank wine: The “beer-jug” is really a wine decanter, with small perforations in the spout to strain out sediment.

The winery at Ashkelon shatters another modern myth about the Philistines: that they were beer-guzzling louts. One of the most characteristic pottery vessels found at Philistine sites is a jug with a strainer spout, commonly referred to as a Philistine “beer jug.”

The strainer supposedly functioned to strain out the beer dregs. The ecology of Philistia, however, favors the production of grapes over barley. The sandy soils and warm, sunny climate of the coastal plain produced many palatable wines, ranging from the light varieties at Ashkelon to the heavier ones at Gaza. The winery at Ashkelon and similar contemporaneous wine presses recently excavated near Ashdod suggest that coastal Philistia was an important producer of wine both for local consumption and for export. Wine, not beer, was the beverage of choice. The “beer-jugs” really served as carafes for wine. The strainer spout acted as a built-in sieve, which filtered out the lees and other impurities. To remove even finer unwanted particles from the wine, the pourer might have placed a linen cloth over the ceramic strainer. The Philistines were not the only winebibbers to filter their wine. Egyptian wall reliefs depict royalty and nobility pouring wine through sieves into their drinking bowls or cups.

While Ashkelon produced wine, Philistine Ekron, located in the inner coastal zone, with its expansive rolling fields of deep fertile soils, was the undisputed olive oil capital of the country, if not the world. More than a hundred olive oil factories lined the outer industrial belt of Ekron. The coast and interior of Philistia thus formed complementary zones for the production of two of the most important cash crops of the Levant—olive oil and wine. Largely because
of these exports to Egypt and other Mediterranean countries, Philistia grew fat from its oil and heady from its wine during the last half of the seventh century B.C.E.

The bazaar, or marketplace, of Ashkelon overlooked the sea. A row of shops flanked the street on one side. The floor of one of the shops (Room 423) was littered with dipper juglets and wine jars. It might well have been a wine shop. Just outside the shop lay an ostracon, which Professor Frank Cross has dated to the late seventh century based on the shape and form of the letters. The inscription lists so many units (bottles) of red wine (yn dm) and so many units of sîxkayr. The verb-form of this latter term means to get drunk, so the noun-form is usually translated as “strong drink”; it probably refers to a particularly strong wine made from dates and known as sîækra in Syriac. To this day, date palms thrive in the Yadin National Park, where the tell of Ashkelon is located.

Another shop (Room 431) contained cuts of meat, including two complete forelegs of beef, which prompted staff zooarchaeologist Brian Hesse to label this the Butcher Shop (see the sidebar “The Zooarchaeological Record: Pigs’ Feet, Cattle Bones and Birds’ Wings”). It is easy to imagine the various cuts of meat hanging in the windows and doorway of this shop in Philistine times, much as they do today in the meat-markets of the Old City of Jerusalem.

Without doubt, the most famous reference to Ashkelon is the lament of David on the death of his friend Prince Jonathan and King Saul at the hands of the Philistines (2 Samuel 1:20):

Tell it not in Gath,  
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,  
lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,  
the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

The Hebrew word translated as “streets” is h\u106s\s\o ut. It does not really mean “streets,” however. As Benjamin Mazar pointed out 30 years ago, the word means “bazaars.” The poet who composed this early Hebrew verse knew about Ashkelon as a great commercial center and entrepôt, where news and information traveled fast. Was it the bazaars of Ashkelon that the poet had in mind? The bazaar was the most bustling part of any Middle Eastern city, then as now. The bazaar that we uncovered from the late seventh century was probably not much different in layout or function from the earlier bazaars to which the Biblical elegist alludes.

Across the street from the shops was a major public building, probably the town’s Administrative Center. As one walked toward the sea, past the shops on the right and the Administrative Center on the left, the street opened up into a square, which we have dubbed “Piazza Philistina.” Bordering the west side of the plaza is a series of long narrow rooms (Rooms 421, 276 and 287), probably magazines of a warehouse, where produce and goods were stored before being put on sale in the shops. Turning left at the plaza, a narrow corridor leads to a square building on the right, tentatively identified as the Counting House because of some of the small finds located there. Nearby were a dozen scale weights of bronze and stone along with two bronze pieces of pans and part of a bronze beam from a scale balance. An ostracon found there appears to be a receipt for grain paid for in silver (see the sidebar “The Epigraphical Record: A Philistine Ostracon from Ashkelon”). In this period just prior to the introduction of minted coinage in the Levant, ingots, jewelry and precious metals served as currency. By the seventh century B.C.E., commodities were often paid for in silver. Prices could be compared using an equivalent unit of value, such as a shekel weight of silver.

The script on the ostracon is also interesting. It is an alphabetic script similar to, but not identical with, Hebrew and Phoenician, peculiar to Philistia in the seventh century. When the Philistines first came to the eastern Mediterranean littoral from the Mycenaean world (including coastal Asia Minor, Crete and the Cyclades, and other sites) in the early 12th century B.C.E., they probably brought with them a language related to Greek and a script that will be related to Linear B—whenever it is found; we still have no sure example of early Philistine writing. Our ostracon indicates that
by the seventh century B.C.E., and perhaps as early as the time of David and Solomon, the Philistines were using a local script and had adopted a Semitic dialect as well.

One thing is clear: this large, sophisticated Philistine metropolis of the late seventh century B.C.E. was thoroughly destroyed. The destruction of Philistine Ashkelon was complete and final. The Iron Age, in archaeological terms, had ended.

Archaeology cannot be so precise as to date the destruction of Ashkelon to 604 B.C.E., but the *Babylonian Chronicle* leaves little doubt that the late seventh-century destruction we found all over the site, followed by a 75- to 80-year gap in occupation until the Persian Period, was the work of Nebuchadrezzar in 604 B.C.E.

Images of destruction. Ashkelon’s excavators found evidence of Babylonian devastation throughout the city: smashed pottery, charcoal, vitrified brick, charred wheat, collapsed roofs and debris.

After razing Ashkelon, Nebuchadrezzar destroyed Ekron and later battled with the Egyptians over Gaza. He then retired to Babylon in 601/600 B.C.E. A year later his troops returned to the Levant, conquering a number of Judahite cities and besieging Jerusalem. In 586 B.C.E., Jerusalem’s defenses collapsed and the city, with its Temple, was completely destroyed. Many of the Jews, like the Philistines before them, were led into Exile.

Earlier in the late eighth–early seventh centuries the Assyrians had made a serious investment in the West. They established administrative provinces where former kingdoms and city-states had been. They developed a complex imperial apparatus and infrastructure to insure that Mediterranean wealth was siphoned into their coffers. Nebuchadrezzar probably lacked the capability of imposing an effective imperial bureaucracy on these small Mediterranean states as Assyria had done. His overriding concern was with Egypt. And his instrument of foreign policy toward real or potential allies of Egypt was a blunt one—annihilation, and for those who survived, deportation. Throughout Philistia, and later throughout Judah, his scorched-earth policy created a veritable wasteland west of the
Jordan River. Those fortunate enough to survive this devastation were usually deported to Babylonia.

Ashkelon’s excavators found evidence of Babylonian devastation throughout the city. The most disturbing sign of the invaders’ ferocity, however, lay in one of the bazaar’s shops: the skeleton of a 35-year-old woman, who had sought to hide from her attackers among the shop’s large storage jars. Lying on her back with her legs recoiled in terror, she lifted her left arm up to her head, as if to ward off a blow. The physical anthropologist who examined this skeleton determined that the woman had been clubbed in the head with a blunt instrument.

Philistines, Jews and many others were exiled to Babylonia by Nebuchadrezzar. He needed deportees to repopulate and rehabilitate his empire after the depletion of its manpower in the earlier Assyro-Babylonian wars. In a rations list in cuneiform, dated to 592 B.C.E., we find prominent Ashkelonians serving Nebuchadrezzar in Babylon: two sons of Aga (the last king of Philistine Ashkelon), three mariners, several officials and chief musicians—all deportees from Ashkelon.

A century and a half later, as we know from the Murashu Archive, masses of deportees from the West had been settled in the Nippur region, southeast of Babylon. Philistines from Ashkelon and Gaza were living in their own ethnic communities located along canals leading into Nippur, where they were doing business with a big firm run by the Jewish Murashu family.

Only with Cyrus the Great, the Persian successor to the Babylonians, does the archaeological record begin again in Ashkelon (where Phoenicians settled; Philistines did not return from the diaspora)—as in Jerusalem and in Judah, where many Jewish exiles returned to their homeland.

According to the Chronicler, writing in the fifth century B.C.E., long after Nebuchadrezzar’s destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Judah “lay desolate” for 70 years “until the land had made up for its sabbaths” (2 Chronicles 36:20–23).

Before Nebuchadrezzar’s juggernaut advanced toward Ashkelon, the Philistines probably felt secure in their well-fortified city of 10,000–12,000 inhabitants. They had refortified the seaport by adding another thick sheath of sand and debris over the mile-and-a-half arc of artificial earthen ramparts (the so-called glacis construction) around the city. We have excavated two large mudbrick towers on the crest of the glacis, about 60 feet apart. If this pattern
persists along the crest of the arc, as many as 50 towers may have fortified the city when Nebuchadrezzar attacked. This fortification system was destroyed at the end of the seventh century B.C.E., presumably by Nebuchadrezzar’s forces.

In the winery mentioned earlier, remnants of charred wood were all that remained of the panelling that once framed mudbrick doorjams. Indeed, the path of fiery destruction could be traced throughout the building by carefully observing the crushed pottery, charcoal, vitrified mudbrick, and wall and ceiling fragments. There was no doubt that the building had come to an abrupt and catastrophic end. We may conclude that vineyards that took numerous generations of peace, stability and nurturing to produce were destroyed almost overnight by Nebuchadrezzar and his vandals.

As with the winery, so with the Counting House. A large container of olive oil had spilled on the floor; when the fires of destruction reached that part of the building, they burned so hot that mud bricks and other clay materials were vitrified.

The rest of the bazaar, too, was plundered and pillaged in every area. In the winter of 604 B.C.E., wailing and despair replaced the joy and laughter that had once rung throughout the Ashkelon bazaar. Everywhere in the bazaar we found smashed pottery vessels by the hundreds amid the destruction debris, much of it identical to what we saw in the winery.

Evidence of just how far into the city Nebuchadrezzar’s troops proceeded came to light in one of the shops of the bazaar (Room 406), where we found the skeleton of a middle-aged woman, about 35 years old, who had been crouching down among the storage jars, attempting to hide from the attackers. When we found her, she was lying on her back, her legs flexed and akimbo, her left arm reaching toward her head. The skull was badly fragmented. We removed the skeleton to the laboratory of physical anthropologist Patricia Smith of Hebrew University, who carefully reconstructed the skull and determined that the woman had been clubbed in the head with a blunt instrument.

“Ashkelon is silenced,” wailed the prophet Jeremiah at the destruction of Israel’s arch enemy; “For the Lord is destroying the Philistines” (Jeremiah 47:5, 4).

After destroying Philistine Ashkelon, Nebuchadrezzar moved on to the inland Philistine city of Ekron (Tel Miqne), which is being excavated by a joint Israeli-American team headed by Hebrew University professor Trude Dothan and the director of the W.F. Albright School of Archaeological Research, Seymour Gitin. The devastation of Ekron at the hands of Nebuchadrezzar in 603 B.C.E. (or perhaps in 601 B.C.E.) has left an incredible yield of material remains, including thousands of whole or restorable pots, animal bones and a rich array of small finds, including several Egyptian objects.

During the seventh century B.C.E., the kings of Judah vacillated between Egypt and Babylonia half a dozen times or more. Ashkelon and Ekron cast their lots with Egypt. Although Nebuchadrezzar never succeeded in conquering Egypt itself, he was nevertheless able to reduce Egypt’s actual and potential allies and client-states to rubble. Eventually, the pro-Egyptian policy of Judah (against the counsel of Jeremiah) led to the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah in 586 B.C.E. The First Temple period was at an end.
This collection of pottery sherds contains a number of distinctive styles. The Wild Goat Style pottery, which depicts not only goats but also geese and stags, was likely produced at many different centers in East Greece. The sherd with the human-headed sphinx is from Chios, while the sherd with scallops (bottom row, second from left) is from Corinth.

A port of call for ancient Mediterranean mariners, Ashkelon was the destination of wares from Phoenicia, Ionia, the Greek islands, Greece and Egypt, which were traded for wine, olive oil and other goods from the surrounding regions and the interior.

Imported pottery provides evidence of trade with the Greek island of Chios (next photo) and with Cyprus (second photo below). The collection of sherds above contains a number of distinctive styles, such as Wild Goat Style pottery (which includes depictions not only of goats but also of geese and stags), thought by some to be manufactured in Ionia, but more likely produced at many different centers in East Greece. The sherd with the human-headed sphinx is also from Chios, while the sherd with scallops (top photo, bottom row, second from left) is from Corinth.
Numerous cultic artifacts from Egypt, among them a faience figurine of the half human, half lion dwarf-god Bes (second photo below), protector of the home and family, and an abalone jewelry box with nine small amulets (next photo), suggest that Ashkelon was home to a permanent Egyptian enclave with its own sanctuary. In the seventh century B.C.E., Philistia had strong cultural and political ties with Egypt; like Judah to the east, Philistia sided with Egypt against Babylonia in the struggle for Near Eastern hegemony. Both
suffered for that choice of allegiance: Philistine Ashkelon was sacked and burned in 604 B.C.E.; and Judahite Jerusalem, after a long siege by the Babylonians, was destroyed in 586 B.C.E.

![Abalone jewelry box with nine small amulets](image1)

**Carl Andrews, Leon Levy Expedition**

Abalone jewelry box with nine small amulets.

![Faience figurine of the Egyptian god Bes](image2)

**Carl Andrews, Leon Levy Expedition**

Faience figurine of the Egyptian god Bes.
In the ashes of Ashkelon’s winery lay a cache of seven bronze bottles, called situlae (shown below and on this issue’s cover). Each bottle contained depictions in relief of Egyptian deities. In the midst of the situlae, the excavators found a bronze offering table engraved with bread and libation flasks; around the table are two baboons, a falcon, a jackal and a frog.

![Bronze bottles with Egyptian deities](image)

Ilan Sztulman, Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon

Seven bronze bottles (situlae) depicting Egyptian deities.

Situlae are votive offerings, perhaps for the revivification of the dead. The most prominent deity represented is Min, on the bottle at upper right: Min is depicted erect, masturbating himself with his left hand while throwing his right hand up in a gesture of deepest pleasure. Lawrence Stager suggests that for the Egyptians Min’s act of masturbation mirrored the original life-giving force from which all generative power derives. These phallic-shaped bronze bottles may have contained semen or other liquids, such as milk, to symbolize the power of giving life.

The Zooarchaeological Record: Pigs’ Feet, Cattle Bones and Birds’ Wings

By Brian Hesse and Paula Wapnish

Sidebar to: The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction

In the 1992 and 1993 seasons at Ashkelon, over 12,000 animal bones were found in the destruction debris now dated to 604 B.C.E.

About half of these bones were found in the street outside the square building called the Counting House. This
suggests that this area was used for carcass processing, although part of the accumulation may have resulted from the fact that this area is a slight downslope and may have accumulated remains through erosion.

Several other considerations, in addition to the accumulation of bones, indicate that this was a carcass-processing area. Of the 43 articulations (bones found in anatomical relationship) that were excavated, the largest concentration (16) was found in this same area. Most of these articulations were of non-meaty portions of the carcass—"wrists" and "ankles" still attached to the toe bones of sheep or goats. This concentration of articulations indicates a scene of primary carcass processing in the months prior to the destruction of Ashkelon in the winter of 604 B.C.E.

Five of the animals represented by these feet were 16 to 24 months old when they died. Assuming they were born in the seasonal pattern typical for sheep and goats in the Near East, these feet came from animals that died in late fall or early winter. The age of the animals at death is consistent with the historical record, since Nebuchadrezzar's destruction of Ashkelon in early winter would have sealed the deposit before the feet had a chance to be scattered by exposure to the elements, scavenged by dogs or trampled by traffic.

Three vertebral column sections were also found in this area. These sections were probably also a by-product of primary butchery.

Because the societies of the ancient Near East had only a limited technical capacity to store fresh meat, slaughtered animals had to be quickly processed. Ethnographic analogies suggest that entire sheep and goat carcasses were hung up along the street, with the meat cut off at purchasers' requests. Since the most desirable portions of the carcass may have been carried off for further processing with the bones still embedded in the meat, the by-products of the intial steps of butchery (the skinning of the animal and the removal of non-meaty portions) are all that remain to mark the activity.

A cache of "ankle" bones (astragali) was also found in the Counting House. Some of these nearly cubical bones were polished on several surfaces, a common practice that allowed the bones to roll more easily when used as dice. But they also may have been used as counters. A number of other bones, mostly the articular ends of long bones, showed evidence of sawing. These bone sections are not just the by-products of butchery; they also represent the first step in the preparation of "blanks" for the large-scale manufacture of bone tools, amply evidenced from ten years of digging at Ashkelon.

In one of the shops off the Piazza Philistina (Room 431), two complete lower forelegs of cattle were found. The discovery of these meaty portions suggests that this was a butcher's shop. A second concentration of cattle remains, again including meatier portions of the anatomy, was found in another room (Room 422). The spatial segregation of cattle remains from the remains of sheep and goats suggests that these animals were purveyed through separate marketing systems. Room 422 produced another surprise: Wings and legs from at least 12 small birds were found concentrated in one area. Perhaps both of these rooms were areas where meat was further prepared for cooking.

Nearly 1,800 fish bones were also recovered, a large part of which were found in a single room, the Wine Shop. This suggests that fish, too, were marketed and consumed through a system independent of barnyard stock.

What this patterning shows is that animals arrived at market through organized channels, not through sporadic marketing by individual households.

No camel remains and only nine pig, three gazelle and five deer bone fragments were recovered. Pigs, gazelle
and deer may have been part of the domestic mode of subsistence and not regularly processed commercially.

Another anomaly: Sheep and goat remains outnumber cattle remains about eleven to one, a ratio unexpected in urban Philistia, where intensive agriculture dependent on animal labor likely supported the population. We suspect that this anomaly is due to the fact that only part of the site has been excavated. In some new area of excavation, we might well find an abattoir that once specialized in beef.

The Epigraphical Record: A Philistine Ostracon from Ashkelon

By Frank Moore Cross

Sidebar to: The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction

Zev Radovan, Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon

Philistine ostracon discovered in the Counting House at Ashkelon.

Excavators at Ashkelon recently found an inscribed potsherd that throws light on the little-known language and script of the Philistines in the seventh century B.C.E. It was dug out of debris of the destruction level left by Babylonian forces after their attack on the city in 604 B.C.E. The inscription is on the weathered body sherd
of an Iron Age II jar with red slip and burnishing. The text of the inscription penned on the sherd is only partially preserved—it is broken off on both sides and the ink is only faintly preserved in some words. What little we can read, however, is of no little interest:

1. ]m'br . sú . tsú[  
2. ]k½w . ysú n½ . l[  
3. ]'br [...] s|pn½[

1. ]from the (cereal) crop which you[  
2. ]… they shall pay to[  
3. ]… (cereal) crop of S|apan-[Divine Name?]

The ostracon appears to be an agreement for the purchase or delivery of grain. The word 'b(w)r is rather rare in Biblical Hebrew, but it also appears in Middle Hebrew, in Imperial and later Aramaic, in Phoenician and in Akkadian (ebuCru), with the meanings “produce (of the field),” “crop” (especially of a cereal) and “grain.” The personal name in the final line is familiar from such names as Biblical Zephaniah (s|pnyhw) or Phoenician S|apan-ba’l.

According to Lawrence Stager, director of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, the ostracon was found associated with a dozen or so cuboid weights, a scale balance and storage jars containing the charred remains of grain, especially wheat. These might well be the remains of a grain storage area and its “office” and records.

Of more interest to the epigraphist than the rather banal content of the ostracon is the script in which it is inscribed. In the Persian remains of the city of Ashkelon, the considerable number of ostraca found have been inscribed in Phoenician and (in lesser degree) in Aramaic scripts. The script of this ostracon from the late Philistine stratum before the city’s fall to Nebuchadrezzar is neither Phoenician nor Aramaic. It stands very close to Hebrew, and is obviously derived from Hebrew. It also shares many traits with Edomite, a script also derived from Hebrew. However, it shows distinctive typological characteristics and must be given its own name as a local or national script.

I have been inclined to call it Hebreo-Philistine to underline its affinities with Hebrew, and to save the simple term “Philistine” for an older script, presumably a script with Aegean affinities like the Deir ‘Allaṣ clay tablets. Professor Stager has suggested “Neo-Philistine.” This label would have the advantage of following the practice of naming national scripts without hyphenated names denoting their origins. We do not speak of Hebreo-Edomite, Hebreo-Moabite, Aramaeo-Nabataean or Aramaeo-Ammonite but simply of Edomite, Moabite, Nabataean or Ammonite. So I shall call the script Neo-Philistine.

Joseph Naveh in an important essay, “Writing and Scripts in Seventh-Century B.C.E. Philistia: The New Evidence from Tell Jemmeh” (Israel Exploration Journal 35 [1985], pp. 8–21), collects a number of texts stemming from Philistine sites, or having peculiarities in common with texts whose provenience is clearly Philistine. He proposes that the script of these texts be termed Philistine. Noting, however, that these texts are not homogeneous, he suggests that the chancelleries of the great Philistine city-states may have had slightly differing styles comparable to the situation in Trans-Jordan with Ammonite, Moabite, Nabataean or Ammonite. So I shall call the script Neo-Philistine.

The fact that the Philistine script and orthography of this period stem from Hebrew—and not Phoenician—is surprising. It points to a period of strong Israelite cultural influence on—and most likely political domination of—the Philistines. The era of the United Monarchy of David and Solomon provides the appropriate context for the borrowing. This is the period when, according to Biblical accounts, Israel exercised hegemony over the
Philistine city-states.

We hope that future seasons at Ashkelon will furnish more inscriptions in “Neo-Philistine,” and that our knowledge of the Philistine script and language will increase in sophistication from its present sketchy state.

Footnotes:

a. In Genesis 22:17, God assures Abraham that his descendants will be able to “seize the gates of their enemies.” The implication is that once the gates were taken, the battle was over; the city might as well surrender and avoid further destruction. In fact, “gates” is often a metonym for “cities” in Biblical Hebrew (see Judges 5:11).

b. The prodigious efforts of Seymour Gitin to link the prosperity of Ekron to the Assyrian Empire have produced an anachronistic conclusion. The economic “take off” did not occur during the late eighth or early seventh centuries B.C.E., but later in the second half of the seventh century B.C.E. What propelled the olive oil industry at Ekron into the international sphere was not a dying Assyria but a rising Egypt, ever the greatest consumer of Levantine olive oil. The expansion of Ekron and the development of its oil industry occurred after Assyrian interest and power in the West had begun to wane in the late 640s.

c. Gabriel Barkay extends the use of the Jerusalem Ketef Hinnom tomb into this gap; but that does not mean the city was rebuilt or widely inhabited.

d. It was not from want of trying, however. In 601/600 B.C.E. Nebuchadrezzar over-extended his army by invading Egypt; he was defeated by Necho II, who then reconquered Gaza.

Endnotes:


5. The Egyptologist Dr. Michael Baud examined the *situlae* and suggested this interpretation of Min’s gesture, also based on statuary of the deity.


