Philistines and Phokaians: comparative hinterlands and Middle Grounds

Irad Malkin
Philistines and Phokaians: comparative hinterlands and Middle Grounds

Irad Malkin  
Cummings Chair of Mediterranean History and Culture, Tel Aviv University, Department of History

Abstract

Greek colonization implies a ship-to-shore, or a coast-to-hinterland, perspective. Inevitably, due to lack of non-Greek literary evidence and the limits of interpretation of material evidence, we tend to follow this perspective when studying interactions with peoples of the hinterland. However, we do not always know what questions to ask. I suggest that by analyzing an analogous situation we may get a richer understanding of the spectrum of issues involved. In this article I study the cycle of Samson in the Book of Judges, since it provides us with a reverse situation: a hinterland perspective on “Aegean colonists” who established city-states on the coast (Gaza, Ascalon and Ashdod) and kept advancing to the hinterland (Ekron, Gath, Timna). Several points of comparison to the colonial situation in southern France are made. Finally, the case of the Philistines, who did not become Greek, indicates the contrast with other migrants: the Ionians, for example, similarly settling on narrow coastlands in Asia Minor, eventually became “Greek” through the pull of maritime networks from which the Philistines became separated.

Keywords: colonization, hinterland, migration, Phokaia, Phoenicians, Hebrews, Ionians, Philistines, intermariage

Résumé

La colonisation grecque implique une dynamique qui va de la côte vers l’arrière-pays. Inévitablement, en raison du manque de données littéraires non grecques et des limites de l’interprétation des indices matériels, nous avons tendance à suivre cette perspective lorsque l’on étudie les interactions avec les peuples de l’arrière-pays. Cependant, nous ne savons pas toujours quelles questions poser. Je suggère que par l’analyse d’une situation analogue, nous pouvons obtenir une meilleure compréhension de l’ensemble des problèmes en jeu. Dans cet article, j’étudie le cycle de Samson dans le Livre des Juges, car il nous offre une situation inverse : un point de vue de l’arrière-pays sur les “colons de la mer Égée” qui ont établi des cités-états sur la côte (la bande de Gaza, Ascalon et Ashdod) sans s’avancer dans l’arrière-pays (Hékron, Gath, Timna). Plusieurs points de comparaison avec la situation coloniale dans le sud de la France sont relevés. Enfin, le cas des Philistins, qui ne sont pas devenus grecs, offre un contraste avec d’autres migrants : les Ioniens, par exemple, installés sur la côte étroite de l’Asie Mineure, sont finalement devenus « grecs » par l’attraction des réseaux maritimes dont les Philistins se sont séparés.

Mots-clés : colonisation, arrière-pays, migrations, Phocéens, Phéniciens, Hébreux, Ioniens, Philistins, mariages mixtes
For those interested in ancient Mediterranean colonization the view from the sea is the natural one to adopt: together with the ancient Greeks and Phoenicians we observe the world from ship to shore. This is the correct perspective insofar as it follows the pattern of foundations on offshore islands and mainland promontories. Similarly, when we examine relations with non-Greek peoples we mostly do so from the coastal perspective of the colonies and their adjacent territorial hinterland, the chôra. Massalia, for example, founded cities and was influential in an enormous coastal chôra. This was typical of Greek maritime colonization: no huge territorial conquest (as Julius Caesar would effect in Gaul in the mid-first century BCE), but coastal hinterlands. The chôra remained narrow in size (some 5-15 Km) for some 600 years.¹

What we miss, however, is the reverse, local perspective, the view from the hinterland. For Massalia we have a lovely tale about one of the founders, Protis, marrying Gyptis, a local princess, implying negotiated relations with “natives” among whom Protis and his men settled.² It is suspiciously similar to another Phokaian story about Lampsake (eponym of Lampsakos, another Phokaian colony) who mediated between the colonists and the local population in a similar way.³ Both Lampsake and Gyptis are portrayed as local, non-Greek women, the union with whom enables integration by the Greek settlers, thus hinting at an initial Middle Ground situation.⁴

Certain local perspectives are suggested by the archaeological evidence from southern Gaul. Over time, it points to a series of “anti-poleis”, i.e., either Greek or non-Greek settlements evolving or being founded in a parallel band and within a relatively short distance from each other (as the name Antipolis, for example suggests, although more often we observe non-Greek settlements founded in relation to the Greek ones). These also probably served as points of material and cultural exchange. Their existence gives the lie to a scholarly approach that sees the relations of “colonists and native populations” as a zero-sum game, where the success of the one is inevitably at the expense of the other. Moreover, it also gives the lie to the very term “native”: the foundation of these new, non-Greek settlements, points to movement and immigration towards the coastal areas, perhaps even at the expense of other “natives”. Thus I prefer to call such populations “local” rather than “native.”⁵ We would have liked to know what reaction, attitude and impact those newly arriving from the sea had on the hinterland, non-Greek peoples and, conversely, how these Greeks were seen. However, explicit expressions of local perspective are inaccessible to us: we simply have no specifically relevant, non-Greek sources from Gaul.⁶

How might it have seemed were we to have access to such perspectives? What might have been the attitudes, types of contact, and spatial relations that the people of the hinterland had with those inhabiting coastal strips? We may suppose, with some degree of probability, that the modalities of encounter would have included trade, technology (exchange and services, e.g., metalworking), intermarriage, and labor. Yet all we can do is guess at the spectrum of relations.

To picture what might have been we can look for an analogy. In my view we do have precisely such a hinterland perspective in some of the books of the Old Testament pertaining to both the Philistine and the Phoenician coastal cities vis-à-vis the Israelites who inhabited the hinterland. Here I wish to illustrate the thematic characteristics of such views from the hinterland through the cycle of Samson stories in the Book of Judges.⁷ My purpose is to suggest a spectrum of local attitudes and aspects of Middle Ground co-existence. I make no claim to the historicity of any of the Samson episodes, nor shall I commit myself to any specific date for its composition, although I am in general inclined to the view that the cycle does not reflect the realities of the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE (supposedly the time of Philistine settlement and growth) but of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.⁸ All we can say is that in a comparable structural circumstance (strong, technologically developed coastal cities of Aegean origins vs. weaker hinterland peoples) we may expect a similar range of attitudes and practices of space within the colonial Middle Grounds and at the major colonial sites themselves.

¹ I wish to thank the editors of this volume for their help and patience. Special thanks are due to Assaf Yarur-Landau of Haifa University and Seymour Gitin, Director of the F.W. Albright Institute for Archeological Research, Jerusalem, and to Tal Goldfajn and Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, for their comments and help in a field that is new to me. Responsibility for the text that follows remains of course mine.
⁴ On the use of the term «Middle Ground» in colonial encounters see Malkin 2002 and below.
⁵ Hodos 2006 with Malkin 2011b. Admittedly, “local” also begs the question, since it assumes movements that are regional; it is quite possible, however, that non-Greeks could come closer to the coast from far-away.
⁶ See Mullen 2013.
⁷ On the structure of the Samson-cycle in the Book of Judges see Amit 1992, pp. 248-286. I am currently also studying the stories of the migration of the Danites, the new city foundation following the conquest of a town under feeble Sidonian protection, and the establishment of a new temple.
⁸ Finkelstein 2002 with references to the debate and below.
It is important to stress again one of the main traits of a colonial Middle Ground: it is a negotiated “third space” where nobody has the force to completely dominate the other; where each “side” plays a double mirror game of mutual images for the sake of accommodation or the control of hostilities; where “creative misunderstandings” encourage new forms of encounters and cultural contacts; where the metaphoric Middle Ground may overlap with the actual middle ground, a physical space, where people meet. Samson, a frontier person who inhabited that middle ground, supposedly the quintessential anti-Philistine folk-hero, will be shown to be also the one most eager to assimilate among Philistines.

The attitudes that will be revealed are not counterintuitive: a strong sense of being under the protection/domination of a coastal city state; technological inferiority; a sense of envy and admiration mixed with hatred; a wish to keep apart while stressing cultural and ethnic differences, such as “uncircumcised Philistines” and the worship of other gods, contrasted with a reality of frequent interaction, specifically marriage and paid sex.

Parallel between Greek ktiseis (foundation stories) and Hebrew migration-conquest-and foundation stories have been pointed out before, sometimes in order to determine the direct historiographical impact of Greek writing traditions on certain Biblical texts. For example, In his article “The danite campaign northward (Judges xvii-xviii) and the migration of the Phokaians to Massalia (Strabo IV 1.4)” Nadav Na’aman looks for similarities in procedure, notably the cult transfer of sacred objects, in order to point to close parallelism and to claim probable influence of Greek foundation stories on the particular story of the Danites conquest and colonization (and hence dating the story as post mid-sixth century).

I have no idea how reliable is this kind of Quellenforschung, and I can easily see the argument going the other direction as well (Hebrews influencing Greeks). But influence is not my interest here. In general, I would assume that such stories can arise independently within a situation that is structurally similar: settlers

---

10 Hdt. 4.76-80. In Herodotus it is the Scythians themselves who kill their king, the narratological opposite of the Samson story. Yet the two stories also reflect the same (apparent) «impossibility» of crossing cultural boundaries.

arrive from the sea; their settlements develop into city states; these do not conquer huge territories but content themselves with control of an agricultural chôra. This would be true of Philistines, Phokaians and Phoenicians (both those already existing in the Levantine coast and the Phoenicians settlements in the Mediterranean).

Samson was born to a Danite family in Tsor’a at a time when “… the Israelites again did that which was bad in the eyes of Jehovah; and Jehovah delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.” (Judges 13.1). Upon his birth it was prophesied that he “shall begin to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.” (13.5). Most commentators take the point of view of the biblical author and his editors in terms of his theological purpose, the relations between Jehovah and the Israelites. My concern, however, will be more with the narrative details that sometimes work against that professed purpose, such as the types of interaction; directions, places and their spatial dimension; and incidental details of material culture and social habits.

The geography is significant: Samson moves within a territory between the hinterland strip (Tsor’a, eshta’ol) of the anti-polis type (see below on Tsor’a and Timna) and the Philistines who inhabit cities within the coastal strip of Palestine, such as Ascalon, Ashdod, and Gaza. This is a movement within the frontier zone between Philistines and Israelites, as well as inside the Philistine chôra (“territory”) itself. Their cities are walled and have heavy iron gates; iron and iron working is also their advantage and monopoly. In comparison, the Judeans inhabit the hinterland; they fear the Philistines but seem to have constant interactions with them. Samson’s own encounters are mostly with Philistine women, two of whom he marries, but he also tries to befriend young Philistine men, who are called his “companions,” (דרieme , close friends), even though they betray him. 13

Samson seems to have been frequenting the Philistines at Timna, which is identified with Tel Batash, apparently a Philistine sub-colony of Ekron (Tel Miqne). Note that Timna is a Philistine secondary foundation that pushed the Philistine area of settlement further inland. Henceforward, Samson’s exploits will lead him in a geographical trajectory towards the coast: first the frontier town Timna, where he meets his first Philistine wife, then a raid on Ascalon, and finally Gaza, further to the south on the coast, where he first visits a prostitute. Finally, his meeting with Delilah is in a middle ground that is both concrete and metaphoric: he met the woman (was she Philistine, Canaanite, or an Israelite? The text is silent on this) in the Sorek river valley, a true Middle Ground zone connecting Philistia and the hills of Jerusalem. Spatially, this is a movement from the hinterland, from Tsor’a to the more recent, neighboring Philistine settlement, then to the great city states, then to the Middle Ground, where identities are ambiguous, and finally back to Gaza, the southernmost coastal Philistine city, were Samson would bring down Dagon’s temple, killing a crowd of Philistines and himself.

Samson, first alone, then accompanied by his parents, “comes down” to Timna. “Coming down” is also the expression is 1Samuel (13.20) “… but all the Israelites went down (וַיַּשְׁלָח) to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his plowshare, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock.” Here the image is explicit: all Israelites supposedly would descend and frequent the more technologically advanced, metal-working, Philistines center (regardless of the political reasons the biblical author imputes for this frequentation). 14

Samson’s goal, so it appears from the terms of the narrative, was to assimilate in Philistine society: at Timna he thought he had found new companions and a new wife, 16 who was expected to remain, so it seems, in Timna and not follow him to his home at Tsor’a. His anger and subsequent feats of revenge can be interpreted as a reaction to a failure at becoming “one of the (Philistine) lads”: he was mocked, cheated by his companions, and lost his wife to one of them.

When Samson first announced his intention to marry the Timnite woman his parents were unhappy:

Then his father and his mother said unto him: ‘Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people (הָנָּה רֹאוֹת), that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised (הָנָּה רֹאוֹת) Philistines?’ 17

Note the contrast, on the one hand, between the ethnic (“my people”) and the cultural markers of difference (uncircumcised) and, on the other, the actual contacts which seem more common than not. Eventually, both Samson and his parents go to Timna (so the hero’s going

---

12 Samson’s family lived «between Tsor’a and Eshta’ol» Judges 13.25. Tsor’a is mentioned in Joshua 15.32 and is specified as the frontier of the Dan tribe 19.41. A frontier city facing the Philistines, it was fortified by Rehoboam, King of Judea against the Philistines (1 Chron. 11.5-12). For the expression and its Danite territorial significance see Zakovitch 1982, p. 74.

13 The meaning of mere’a is a “close friend”; Cf. Judges 14.11; 14.20; 15.2; 15.3 and Genesis 26.26; Job 6.14 and more. It is sometimes akin to “brother” 2Samuel 3.8:Proverbs 19.7.


15 Cf. Amos 6.2: “… go down (וַיְבָרָךְ) to Gath of the Philistines.” On the literary significance of «down» and «up» in the Samson’s cycle Zakovitch 1982, pp. 89; 118; 120; 135.


17 Opposing marriage with foreign women: Crenshaw 1978, pp. 78-81.
is not exceptional) to seek the woman's hand. Nor does the father of the Philistine woman (her name is not given) appear to behave as if the marriage was exceptional. The marriage banquet is then soon arranged at the father-in-law's home (not in J udea), together with Samson's new "companions" who seem to be all Philistines. Eventually, one of them will be given Samson's wife.19

The marriage is accompanied by a feast (literally a drinking-feast יֵכַּהַה, probably involving also song, music and dance; it is presented as habitual for young people and is not marked as something peculiar to the Philistines. That is simply the custom of the young men, says the biblical author: "For so used the young men to do" יֵכַּהַה יִשְׁרָאֵל יְהוָה יָהּ. 20 Thus it appears that marriage across the divide was not only common, but the accompanying ritual too was familiar to all. We can see this later too, when the Philistines become furious when the father of the bride behaves against the common convention of the Middle Ground.

Yet the undercurrent of the biblical author's story is that one had better not trust Philistines. The woman from Timna is forced to betray her new husband, eliciting from him the answer to a riddle on which he had bet heavily with the Philistine companions. She did this under duress, as the thirty Philistine companions threatened to burn down both her and father's house (or just her father). There is no doubt as to their ethnicity: twice they are characterized as "belonging to her people" לְקֵינִי לְיִשְׁרָאֵל, and it is all the "people of the city" אַלְפּוֹתָה לְיהוָה who come up with the answer.

Having lost the bet, Samson takes revenge: he goes "down" (it is not clear from where, probably from Timna towards the coast) to Ascalon (ןִּבְנָיָהוּ ḫטב, 14.19), kills thirty Philistines, and robs them 22 so he can pay his betting debt. Then he returns to the hinterland, to his parents.

After a while Samson attempted visiting his estranged wife at her father's home but was told he was too late: her father tells him she had been given away "to one of your companions" (לְקֵינוֹת), who was most probably a Philistine who had attended the feast, which now explains Samson's ire against all Philistines: "This time shall I be quits with the Philistines, when I do them a mischief." (15.3)

The whole episode works within the framework of a common Middle Ground. Giving the bride "to a companion" is not an innocent, personal act. Ancient Near Eastern laws, since the law code of Hammurabi (no. 161), are in fact quite specific precisely against this particular offense, especially if the "companions" were also the groomsmen at the wedding feast. The Lipith Eshtar Law no. 21 specifies to the same effect that if, after the groom had come to the house of his father-in-law and made his engagement, and then "they" forced him out and gave his wife to his companion, they will return to him the engagement gifts that he had brought, but his wife may not be a wife to his companion. Perhaps originally they were armed, protecting the feast. 23 Apparently giving the bride not just to someone else, but specifically to a companion of the groom, puts particular shame on the groom's head.

Thus far Samson is to be justified in his anger; but what was he angry about? A law, common to both Philistines and Hebrews, had been broken. The Philistines too were angry: they killed the Philistine father-in-law and his daughter and the reason seems to relate to the breakdown of those common conventions (see below). But the question should be: why were they common in the first place? It appears that both Hebrews and Philistines integrated into a Near Eastern koinē that had been in place long before them. Marriage is of course a reciprocal arrangement and mixed marriages (and their related property issues) need a commonly accepted convention to follow. 24 The same language of reciprocal conventions also appears in what follows.

Moreover, the father of the bride justifies himself, saying to Samson "I thought you hated her." This statement is not really about emotions, but refers to a commonly accepted divorce-terminology. The root קָרָשׁ ("hate, hatred, to hate") applies to men and women alike. If a man "hated" his city and abandoned it and his wife, she may be given to another and he may not reclaim her. 25 Thus, in the eyes of the father-in-Law, Samson had forfeited his wife (קָרָשׁ appears twice in the same

---

18 For the contradictions in the text (at some point it seems the parents were absent) Zakovitch 1982, p. 86.
19 Curiously, the Septuagint renders the Hebrew in verse 11 "when they saw him, that they brought thirty companions to be with him" as when they "feared" him. The Hebrew word מְדַעָה (when they saw) could be read, by adding one letter as מִדַּעָה, when they feared, en tò phoibeishtai autous. Cf. Josephus, Ant. Jud. 5.8.6.
21 Cf. Jeremiah 6.11; Zechariah 9.17; Lamentations 5.13; Ecclesiastes. 11.9.
22 He seems to rob them of more than the bet's worth: he takes their שהָנָה, something equivalent to suits of arms.
sentence). “Hate” is also a reason for a man to leave his wife: “I gave my daughter to this man for a wife and he hated her.”

26 “Hate money” and “hate judgment” can sometimes serve as technical terms for the divorce itself. Apparently women too could make themselves “hateful” to justify divorce. So what we have here is an entire terminology of inter-sexual, formal relations. If these are indeed the issues that reverberate behind the text it implies another Middle Ground dimension: both Philistines and Israelites, not only celebrate according to a commonly accepted framework, “as the boys do,” but also adhere to laws and conventions that regulate matrimonial links. These conventions were common to both yet originated with neither.

In anger, Samson ties burning torches to the tails of 300 foxes and sends them throughout the cultivated fields and olive plantations of the Philistines to burn. This is a nice illustration of the rich agricultural chôra of the Philistines, characteristic precisely of what Greeks would also have grown: cereals, olives, and vines. Timna has its vines (14.5) and Samson’s foxes burn down wheat fields and olive plantations.

The Philistines then inquire as to who did this and why. Their reaction is to turn not against an ethnic other, but against another Philistine, one of their own: When told it was Samson’s father-in-law who was to blame because he had given his daughter to someone else, another Philistine, they “go up” (וירבד) to Timna (a frontier settlement up in the hinterland) and burn down the daughter and her father’s house. Note that it was not the people of Timna who did this, implying a more official Philistine action (which it explicitly becomes later in the story with the seranim; see below). It appears they were unhappy with a breakdown of a common arrangement of intermarriage with the hinterland people. A Philistine uneasiness about Judean reaction is also implied. It is narrated as if intermarriage firmly belonged to a common mental horizon. Samson’s parents, who, expressing the biblical author’s anti-Philistine attitude, supposedly abhorred the idea, but theirs is the voice of the meta-narrative of the divine purpose. The story stresses the interruption of a modus vivendi to the extent that the breakdown of a contract with an Israelite merits the death of the blameworthy Philistines, father and daughter, at the hands of other Philistines. This is an important point to remember when discussing marriage conventions among coastal “colonies” and hinterland, such as that which Elymian Segesta had with both Greeks and Phoenicians in Sicily.

We have just noted a mixture of aspects: cultural animosity and awareness of ethnic difference; a Hebrew sense of being “lorded over” by Philistines (although we do not see any evidence for direct rule); a reality of movement within the spaces of the hinterland and the colonies; contact, familiarity and marriage across ethnic divides. Samson not only marries a Philistine woman; had matters gone well he might have become part of a group of Philistine companions. In other words, such integration is presented as part of an acceptable spectrum of expectations.

By analogy, discussions concerning intermarriage in Greek colonies inevitably move in the dark, depending on interpreting quasi-historical tales (such as that of Protis), material objects, such as fibulae, foreign-sounding personal names (although xenia-relations may provide the reason for those rather than ethnic origins, e.g., Libys, a king of Cyrene), and evidence for marriage rights from the Classical period. Moreover, we lack the diachronic dimension: the Samson story relates to a period when the Philistines were well-established. The story of Protis relates to the time of Massalia’s foundation, not to its subsequent life. In later traditions, Massaliots are supposed to be rather conservative and exclusionary in their relations with non-Greeks, but again, we have no idea about the history of such attitudes.

Samson, unhappy that his wife had been killed, resorts to further, yet measured, revenge: “and after that I’ll cease,” he says (15.7). Samson kills many and retires; only now do the Philistines react, sending “up” an army (15.11). Again we get a glimpse of the spatial perceptions involved: the Philistines literally “went up” (ויבא) to make camp to Judea. The Judeans inquire why they had “come up” (ויבא), clearly indicating the spatial perspective of those living “up” from the shore.

27 Galpaz-Feller p. 93-132.
28 See the discussion in Galpaz-Feller 2006 pp. 124-131. She thinks the law is even more specific: a woman may not be given to someone who was one of the actual groomsmen, but this seems to depend on Samson’s story as we have it.
29 This could be compared to Ovid Fasti 6.679ff.
The threat is sufficient for the Judeans to go and arrest Samson: “Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson: “do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What is this that you have done to us? And he said unto them: ‘as they did unto me, so have I done unto them.”’(15.11). The Judeans hand him over to the cheating Philistines. But Samson, the strong-man hero, having liberated himself from the ropes, finds a jawbone of an ass, and kills a thousand more Philistines. What is noteworthy is the Judean readiness to hand him over, following quite a reasonable Philistine demand. We are still in the accommodated space of the Middle ground, but now the excess is Samson’s, not theirs (remember they have just executed the Philistine wrongdoer).

Samson becomes thirsty and cries to God lest he die at the hand of the arelim, the “uncircumcised”(15.18). The appellation arelim is significant, as it appeals again to circumcision as an ethnic marker. We know that circumcision was the butt of many an Egyptian joke about Greeks. One wonders about attitudes to such differences in the Greek colonial world; for example, how would the circumcised Kolchians have seen the Greeks of the Black sea? Arelim in the Hebrew of the Old Testament comes up in dire confrontational circumstances: Saul falls on his sword, rather than die at the hand of the arelim (1 Samuel 31.4). On the other hand, the details of contact and interaction in the story of Samson stand in marked contrast to the expressed attitude that stresses difference. Samson will now move to his second Philistine woman, the whore from Gaza. In terms of textual criticism it would seem that the avowed purpose of the narrator’s voice (Philistines as “absolute others”) is contradicted by the details he transmits (familiarity and close contacts with philistines). This is not uncommon with ethnic stereotypes in historiography. Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, when writing an ethnography of the Gauls he portrays them as barbaric, nomadic, and roofless; however, when describing a march through Gauls in which he participated he tells of passing by well-built stone houses. He seems unaware of the start contradiction between the topos of the barbarian and the experience of life which seems no different from that of the “civilized” Romans.

Samson goes to Gaza of his own free will. It probably indicates a view of a common type of visit by Hebrews to Philistine cities: they might be going there for trade, metal-needs, or sex. Paid sex is not a common criterion discussed among scholars of Greek colonization as a factor of the Middle Ground. One wonders to what extent this was also a dimension in Greek-local relations in the world of Greek colonies. The Samson story suggests that it is something to look for in the evidence.

Luckily for Samson, he departs from Gaza in the middle of the night while the Philistine Gazans plot to capture him. “And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and laid hold of the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and plucked them up, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of the mountain that is before Hebron.”(16.3) This is a distance of some fifty km (too far for the Philistines to carry their gates back). Here too we note the “up-down” spatial dimensions: Samson climbs the mountain facing Hebron, looking back, down, to the Philistine coast. The fantastic story also emphasizes metal (the gates) as especially marking the Philistines, implying perhaps a gift of iron by Samson to the Judeans.

Unperturbed, Samson moves on to his third woman, the notorious Delilah, who lives in the area between Philistines and Israelites, the valley of the Sorek stream. The Sorek flows along some 70 km, from the hills of Jerusalem via Beth Shemesh (the area of Tsor’a), and the Shephelah, the region of the Philistines. It thus links both areas: the Israelite hinterland and the Philistine country, forming a geographical middle ground between the two. This may explain why Delilah is not expressly called a Philistine; she might have been Canaanite or even a Hebrew. What is important is precisely the ambivalence: it indicates a Middle Ground of complex identities and complex contacts.

The “lords of the Philistines” bribe her to discover the secret of his strength. It is noteworthy that now we get the entire leadership of the Philistines, sarnei plishtim or so it seems, rather than the officials of a particular Philistine city. Delilah eventually succeeds, Samson is captured, blinded, and serves in the prison. The narrative now becomes flamboyant: thousands of Philistines gather in the temple, all wishing to abuse the blind slave; but his strength is renewed and Samson pulls down the temple which collapses and kills himself and thousands more.

The biblical author has his chance to describe the foreignness of the Philistines through their religion: (16.23)”And the lords of the Philistines gathered them together to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god

---

36 Hdt. 2.105 also notes that the Phoenicians and «the Syrians» (this may be a reference to hinterland peoples, such as the Jews, as he distinguishes them from other «Syrians» in the same passage) too are circumcised.
(אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר חֲלֹֽקָּתָּם), and to rejoice; for they said: ‘Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand.’ (16.24) And when the people saw him, they praised their god (יהוה) for they said: ‘Our god (יהוה) hath delivered into our hand our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, who hath slain many of us.’

The author’s aim is implied: “their god (Dagon)” is inferior to Yahweh. But in terms of the details revealed, it indicates close familiarity with Philistine rites, temples, and the make-up of the participating public. This includes the seranim as well as men and women. “Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women (...)”. (16.27)

The Philistine of the Samson stories appear distinctly foreign in terms of the narrative (uncircumcised, worshipping foreign gods); and yet, to the extent the stories reflect eighth- and seventh-century realities, we are no longer dealing with the Philistines of the Bronze Age. We now see them a few centuries since arrival, having pushed further inland and assimilated into the local Middle Grounds, with a mixture of both Aegean and Semitic elements in their language and religion. Their coastal cities never became anything like their northern neighbors the Phoenicians, who kept their religion and set out to sea. As for the Greeks, it was the sea and its networks that allowed the Phoenicians to keep and enhance their distinctiveness, instead of being absorbed in the neighboring hinterlands. By analogy, like the Phoenicians, Greeks in Asia Minor or southern France, living within the confines of relatively narrow chôræi, also kept (and constantly developed) their Greek distinctiveness since their main orientation was the Mediterranean networks, not the hinterlands. The Philistines, on the other hand, seem to have been looking inland, away from the sea.

Perhaps this is because none of the Philistine cities (Gaza, Ascalon, Ashdod; Ekron and Gath were further inland) had a port equivalent to the Phoenician ports further up north. As for their religion, Dagon, so prominent in the story of Samson, is probably not an Aegean deity; he is first known to us from Mesopotamia, dating to the third millennium BCE. In Canaan, he became a god of the earth’s fertility and its grain, and that is how he was worshipped by the Philistines. On the other hand, Aegean elements persisted in Philistine culture: the term seranim seems to be a Bronze-Age legacy. A seventh-century Philistine inscription from Ekrôn (Tel Miqne) mentions five kings. One is called Ikasau, which Joseph Naveh understands as “the Achaean”; most probably it is the same as “Achish,” a name known from the story of David and Achish King of Gath, yet relating to an episode that supposedly had taken place three centuries earlier (Gath had been destroyed ca. 835). It also mentions a major deity that could be identified as Pytho-Gaia, an Aegean deity, which seems likely to be related to the numerous “Ashdoda” figurines found in various Philistine sites. Yet the inscription is written in Semitic, and the names of the four other kings have Semitic names.

The eighth- and mostly seventh-century Philistine areas may be compared to the Middle Ground in southern Italy: there too, within some three centuries since colonization, the late fifth-century Greeks in southern Italy were “absorbed” (or at least no longer spoke Greek) among Lucanians and Oscans, yet kept some distinctive characteristics of the Hellenic identity.

The situation of the people living in the Sorek river valley may be analogous to the situation around ancient Arles by the Rhône: lying by a river route, with good connectivity and with a mixed population. In southern France, the two communities, Massalia and Arles, indicate the difference between a Greek city (Massalia), a foundational colony, and the Middle Ground areas of mixed habitation.

---

40 Cf. 1 Samuel, chapters 1-6.
41 Cf. Stone 1995; Faust 2012, p. 135 «Iron I population in the south ‘played’ with material traits in their ethnic negotiations and boundary maintenance. The Israelites interacted with the dominant Philistines, and defined themselves in contrast to them. The Philistines, too, viewed the Israelites as their ‘other,’ and prior to their rapid acculturation in the Iron II, continuously raised the boundaries between the Israelites and themselves.» For a detailed examination of the material evidence, indicating too the «moment» of transition to fuller assimilation on the part of the Philistines, see Faust and Lev-Tov, 2011. On diet (pigs, absent from neighboring non-Philistine sites) as a mark of ethnic distinctiveness see Hesse 1990. Hesse and Wapnish 1997.
42 A general overview: Albright 1975; Dothan 1982; Dothan 1986; Mazar 1986.
When we observe the *chôra* of Massalia, or the coastal areas of southern France, we note clusters of habitations that functioned as Middle-Ground networks, involving Greeks and non-Greek populations. Storage facilities (silos, granaries) found in several native sites close to Phokaian settlements are seen as having served for an exchange of commodities.54 As Brian Shefton and Michel Bats have shown,55 this is no simple “exchange.” The *chôra* indicates how the edges of regional networks created new neighborhoods with a guarded outlook, at once marking a difference yet serving as a vehicle of cultural and material transmission. We have seen such a wide spectrum of exchange and *convivenza* explicitly in the Samson cycle.

Agathe (Agde) may be comparable to Timna (Tel Batash): its foundation seems to have come after long periods of Middle-Ground contacts. Timna seems to have been a secondary Philistine foundation, further inland. It is in fact quite near to Tsor’a, Samson’s home, itself a frontier town. The context may be the seventh century since Timna may have changed hands after the Assyrian conquest (King Sennacherib’s campaign in 701), since it appears predominantly Philistine mostly in the seventh century, but not in the eighth. Similarly, the archaeological data seems to indicate that having been reduced from its earlier Iron Age I size, Ekron became a major Philistine city again in the seventh century with a huge olive oil industry.53 Similarly perhaps, the first Greek material (four Greek vases) has been found in the non-Greek necropolis of Peyrou, dating to the third quarter of the seventh century. During the last third of the sixth century some Phokaians settled by the Bessan River, some fifteen km. from the sea, at La Monédière. They were also frequenting the site of Agathe (five kilometers from the sea), where they finally settled around the end of the fifth century.54

Tsor’a and Timna may be also compared with Antipolis. Although the site of Greek Antipolis has not been discovered, it was probably founded during the last quarter of the sixth century. Its name is highly significant: it lays apparently “opposite” (*anti*) a local village with prominent Greek influence in its material culture.55 As I have noted elsewhere,56 this “dance” of Greek and native settlements, “talking” to each other at close distances, is a consistent pattern that is seen also in Massalia’s later foundations. Yet this is a Middle-Ground dance: The “Greek” is not entirely Greek, and the “native settlement” seems mixed. Both Samson and Delilah seem to fit this description: in spite of the express aim of the biblical author, to show how God wanted a pretext to punish the Philistines, and in spite of stressing their foreignness (cult, circumcision), the reality that comes out from the details is very similar to the kind of mixtures one might expect: Samson yearns for Philistine company, both masculine (his “companions”) and feminine (his women). I wish we had this kind of color, folkloric as it may be, for the Middle Grounds of the Greek colonial world.

Most of the places settled by Israelites which are named in the books of Joshua and Judges are conquered, not founded *ex nihilo*; at least this is the image projected for us. One wonders about the history of Tsor’a and Eshta’ol, for example, which may further be compared to the site of Baou de Saint Marcel: about the time of Massalia’s foundation we find evidence there for a native site that was settled and fortified ca. 575. It lies inland only seven kilometers from Massalia, and although it contains much Greek material, the place seems to have been non-Greek and newly established *in relation to* the Greek presence—all this with in the first generation of Greek settlement.57

The phenomenon of “antipolis” foundations (Greeks facing a native site or vice versa) is familiar in the history of colonization in various periods and areas. New settlements create new economic niches and attract people from the hinterland who work and produce for the newcomers, trade (and marry?) with them.58 Such observations should seriously modify some of the simplistic Orientalist notions current in postcolonial theory, seeing colonization as a zero-sum game where natives inevitably lose to the colonists.59

Michel Bats, a perceptive and wise student of this phenomenon in southern France, applies the term “gateway communities” to the string of native communities that were created parallel to the Phokaian-Massaliot ones, perhaps analogous to the term I prefer, “Middle-Ground networks,” forming local clusters that undergo

---

54 Morel remarks that the site is somewhat similar to Emporion: a small, similar rectangular plan, with a wall whose position changed several times. Morel 2006, pp. 389–90.
55 Bats 1994, p.146.
56 Malkin 2011, Chapter 5.
58 As Robert Bartlett (1993) has shown with the medieval colonization of Europe, as well as Walter Hawthorne (2001) for the upper Guinea coast. Sometimes, as Kelly (2002) shows with regard to the history of seventeenth-century Dahomey in Africa, an entire “nation kingdom” can be set up on a European model to face those landing on the shore. The shore itself was a middle ground in the sense that neither Europeans nor Dahomeians had been there before.
fluctuating connections. The story in Judges provides us with an illustration of such a Middle Ground from the perspective of the hinterland: on the one hand, animosity, suspicion and derision; on the other, lively interaction on various levels.

There are also some general implications to be drawn from all this with regard to the question of formation of collective identity and the emergence of commonalities of civilization. Why were the Philistines “not Greek”? Or, conversely, why did other Aegean migrants become Greek and the Philistine not? The question does not relate to the DNA of migrants (e.g., “were they actually Greek-speaking Mycenaeans?”) but to the civilizational formation that took place during the Dark Ages which formed the basis of Greek civilization in the early Archaic period. Most would agree that Philistines have an Aegean origin, migrating and settling around the late 12th or the 11th centuries as part of the great kinesis, the upheaval that formed the context of the “Ionian” and of other migrations, such as to Cyprus. Some may have arrived by sea, others by coastal land routes. Yet both in terms of their material culture, and certain aspects of their religion, they seem “Aegean” in origins. As would happen with the Aegean migrations to Cyprus and Asia Minor the Philistines might have become Greek, except they did not. Settling on the coast, their settlements evolved into important city states. This is also what happened to the migrants who reached the shores of Asia Minor during the Dark Ages, except that the latter kept in touch with, and were invigorated by, the maritime networks that crystallized their commonalities as a civilization and defined their identity as Greeks. Instead of merging with their neighbors the “Ionians,” for example, were “pulled” to the sea and became more Greek, whereas the Philistines lost their maritime orientation and gradually (over a few centuries), were acculturated into the region. For the Greeks the process was heightened in the seventh and sixth centuries with further colonization in the Central and western Mediterranean, and the Black Sea.

For this the Philistines had arrived too early and too soon: they reached shores that were simply too distant to be integrated in what later became Hellenic maritime networks. With no great port cities, they expanded inland. Within three or four centuries the Philistines had lost their Aegean language, yet seem to have kept their distinctiveness. The Samson cycle not only confirms this discrete identity but also provides a perspective from the hinterland, which we never get in the Greek colonial world. It is a mixture of, on the one hand, a notional confrontational identity (“them and us”)


References


61 Eriksen 1993.
Vercoutter 1956 : VERCOUTTER (J.) – L’Égypte et le monde égéen préhellénique, étude critique des sources égyptiennes du début de la XVIIIe dynastie à la fin de la XIXe dynastie, Le Caire, IFAO, 1956.