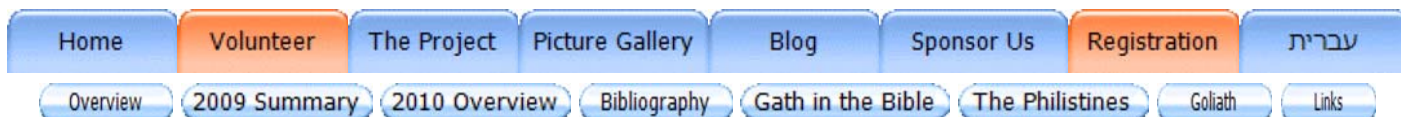




The Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project



Overview of the Project

During the last thirty years, archaeological excavations have revealed much information about the Philistines during the biblical period. In fact, three of the Philistine cities have been excavated (Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron), and fascinating aspects of their culture have been revealed. Not too long ago, a monumental inscription was discovered at Ekron, mentioning a list of the kings of the city from the end of the Iron Age, just a few years before the Babylonian destruction (ca. 604 BCE).

In spite of this work, until quite recently, with the beginning of our project, little was known about Goliath's hometown, Gath. From the biblical text it would appear that Gath was the most important of the Philistine cities during the early period of Philistine history. It was from Gath that Goliath, the fabled champion of the Philistines came, and it was the king of Gath, Achish, who played an important role in the story of the young King David.

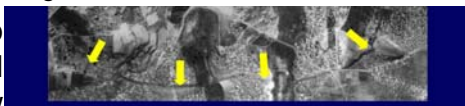
Although there once was a bit of a controversy regarding the exact location of Gath, based on present evidence most scholars believe that it was located at the site known as Tell es-Safi. The tell, which is situated approximately halfway between Jerusalem and Ashkelon, is one of the largest biblical sites in Israel. Settled continuously from the Chalcolithic period (5th mill. BCE) until modern times, it is a veritable mine of archaeological evidence from all periods.

Although its impressive size and archaeological promise were noted during the last century, until recently, very little archaeological research had been conducted at the site. Aside from a brief, two-week excavation conducted in 1899 by Bliss and Macalister, only cursory visits and illicit robber excavations (by the late General Moshe Dayan) took place at the site. Scientific knowledge about this central site, so important for the study of the history and culture of the biblical period, was completely lacking. To resolve this situation, an archaeological project was begun at the site. As of 1996, a team of archaeologists, led by Prof. Aren M. Maeir of Bar-Ilan University initiated a long-term project at the site. Commencing with exploratory surface-survey work to define and plan the future work, the actual excavations were begun in 1997. Since then (1997-2008), the finds have been astonishingly rich and indicate that the project, which most probably will continue for several decades, will become one of the most important excavations in the Southern Levant. In the first phase of the project we have had noteworthy discoveries, and this without a doubt will continue in the next stages of the project.

At the very beginning of our fieldwork, an unusual find was noticed. Through the utilization of aerial photography, we discovered the existence of a previously unknown, manmade trench that surrounds the site. This trench, 2.5 km long, some 8 meters wide and more than five meters



this unique feature is an unparalleled siege system, set up by a besieging army to hinder escape from the besieged city. As of the 2001 season, we have been able to explicitly date this feature to the Iron Age II. It now seems likely that it may be evidence of the Aramean siege of Gath (II Kings 12:17). We can now say that this is earliest siege system known in the entire world!



Another find of extreme importance was uncovered during the 1998 season. In the main excavation area, mere inches below the present-day surface, we excavated a level that was completely devastated in a fiery destruction. In this level we discovered houses that collapsed during the destruction, sealing within them all the original objects that they had contained. This includes an extraordinarily rich assortment of well-preserved finds. These finds include several hundred pottery vessels of various kinds, shapes and functions, including those used for storage, cooking, serving, and cultic purposes. To this one can add various other objects such as ivory decorations and metal weapons. Altogether, these finds provide a well-rounded picture of the various kinds of objects used for different functions in these houses, illuminating daily life in the Land of Israel during the biblical period.

Most significantly, these remains can be dated to a very important period, the 9th century BCE. This is the period immediately after the separation of the "United Kingdom" of David and Solomon into the northern Israelite and southern Judean kingdoms. Recently, some scholars have questioned the veracity of the description of the events in this period as portrayed in the Bible. Accordingly, it is claimed that there is little if any non-biblical archaeological and historical evidence to that relates to this period. But in light of the extraordinarily rich finds that were discovered at T. es-Safi/Gath, it would appear that this at least from an archaeological point of view, this period is in fact well represented at this site.

To this one can add that the rich finds appear to support view that Gath did in fact have a primary role among the Philistines cities during the earlier stages of their history. The results of the excavation have shed light on the fascinating topic of how, when and why the Philistine culture changed. Originating from somewhere in the Aegean area, the Philistines arrived in the Levant at the beginning of the Iron Age (ca. 1200 BCE). After settling in the region, they slowly underwent a process of cultural change, on the one hand retaining some of their original cultural traits, but on the other hand, incorporating many of the local ones as well (such as the local Semitic language, evidence of which has been found in the excavations, including the earliest Philistine inscription known to date, found in the 2005 season). As was reported in the world press, this inscription is quite an exciting find, since it mentions two names that are somewhat reminiscent of the original form of the name Goliath! Since the inscription dates to ca. 950 BCE, it comes from almost the same period as the battle of David and Goliath according to the biblical chronology!



During the last seasons, we continued to expose substantial remains from this impressive destruction level. In addition, other archaeological levels, relating to periods before and after the destruction level were discovered, once again indicating the high potential and importance of the future excavations. We now have an almost complete stratigraphic sequence spanning the Late Bronze Age II (13th cent. BCE) until the late Iron Age II (ca. Late 8th cent. BCE), and, in addition, levels from the Early Bronze Age III (ca. 2800-2200 BCE). Among the



exciting finds from the last season in 2008, we can note the discovery of one of the earliest donkey burials in the Near East (Early Bronze Age), impressive fortifications from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, a structure of apparent cultic function from the Iron Age, and numerous well-preserved finds of the Canaanite, Philistine, and Israelite cultures. One of the most exciting discoveries in the 2008 season was the extremely well-preserved finds in the lower city, destroyed in the late 9th century BCE.

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phases, with particular emphasis on the Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Ages, and various stages of the Iron Age. We will be excavating in several areas of the tell, and we expect to have a wide range of fascinating, and in fact, groundbreaking finds).

All the above promises to give us an exciting season of fieldwork, in which cutting-edge science, enriching experiences, and thrilling new discoveries will be combined. We are sure that all of us, staff, volunteers and students, from Israel and abroad, will enjoy a most fulfilling summer!

Prof. Aren M. Maeir, Director

Tell es-Safi/Gath Excavations

[The Martin \(Szusz\) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology](#)

[Bar Ilan University](#)

Ramat Gan, 52900

maeira@mail.biu.ac.il

