

Saul, David, and the Philistines: || from Geography to History

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Geographical patterns underlying the biblical texts can provide reliable, if widely neglected, historical data due to the non-intentional character of these pieces of information; non-intentional, as these patterns were presumably hidden to the eyes of most authors, redactors and interpreters. Geography allows the reconstruction of Saul's and David's spheres of influence («spheres of influence» being, in the case of 10th century tribal kings¹, the more appropriate term as opposed to «realms»), and, in addition, an evaluation of the specific ruler's attitude towards the Philistines.

1. Establishing the geography of Saul, David, and the Philistines

1.1. The Philistine core and periphery

That the Philistines ever formed some sort of a «national» unity might well be doubted²; as late as in the course of the 7th century, kings of Ekron do not pretend to be more than that: king of Ekron³. Philistia did, however, form a cultural (and economic?) unity in, at least, the 11th and 10th centuries. The distribution of Philistine pottery as an indicator of «wealth» suggests a Philistine core (high density of sites with Philistine pottery) and an inland periphery (low density of sites with a small amount of Philistine ware)⁴.

1.2. Saul

Saul's search of his father's lost donkeys in 1 Sam 9f, and especially the regions transversed in the course of his search, is rather meaningless within the context of the present narrative. It stands to reason that the story once told «how somebody set out to look for donkeys and found a kingdom instead»⁵. The Benjaminite and Ephraimite countries encountered in 1 Sam 9,4-5; 10,2-5 might thus serve as good approximation of Saul's primary power base⁶.

It is quite conceivable that Saul might have conducted raids from his power base to the North, East, South, and West, whether these are reflected in the biblical narrative or not. That the region which he ruled permanently did not exceed Benjamin and (southern?) Ephraim elucidates from 2 Sam 2,8f:

¹ I. Finkelstein – N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed. Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York 2001) 123-145.

² The construction of Philistia as a «nation» by the biblical authors is nothing more than an offshoot of their construction of pre-exilic Israel as a «nation», cf. E.A. Knauf, *Die Umwelt des Alten Testaments* (NSK-AT 29; 1994) 184-189; R.G. Kratz, *Israel als Staat und Volk: ZThK 97* (2000) 1-17.

³ S. Gittin - T. Dothan - J. Naveh, *A Royal Dedicatory Inscription from Ekron: IEJ 47* (1997) 1-16 (9); KAI 266.

⁴ For the mechanisms operative in the rise and decline of the «Philistia-centered economic system», cf. E.A. Knauf: *TA 27* (2000) 81-87. The ascendancy of Philistia over Phoenicia (and Cyprus) might have been partially upheld by maritime power, cf. Unamun's adventures with the Tjekker of Dor. The (re-)emergence of the «Phoenicia-centered system» after 925 BCE might partially have been due to the (re-)establishment of Egyptian suzerainty 925-850 BCE.

⁵ For a different evaluation of the present narrative, cf. D.V. Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (JSOT.S 121; 1991) 43f, and for a different reconstruction of the original story, id.: *ABD V* (1992) 993f.

⁶ Cf. D.V. Edelman, *Saul's Journey through Mt. Ephraim and Samuel's Ramah* (1 Sam 9:4-5; 10:2-5): *ZDPV 104* (1988) 44-58. Her reconstruction of the territory in question, as presented p. 46 map 1, is basically still valid under the premisses of the «Low Chronology».

Abner ben Ner, commander of the army which Saul had, took [Eshbaal⁷] ben Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim. (9) He made him king to ('el) Gilead, the Ashurite, and the Jezreel, and over ('al) Ephraim and Benjamin, i.e.⁸ over all Israel.

One ought to be suspicious whenever a biblical text says «all Israel». In this case, however, it is the orthography (כלה instead of כלל) which indicates that the redactor found a pre-exilic text which he failed (or refused) to normalize⁹. In addition, «all Israel» is geographically and ethnographically defined in a manner irreconcilable with the perception of «all Israel of the twelve tribes». Judah is not comprised in «all Israel». The short list distinguishes Eshbaal's kingship «over» Ephraim and Benjamin from his kingship «to» the Ashurite, Jezreel and Gilead. The easy way out is, as usual, to assume a clerical error¹⁰. But, as D. Edelman has pointed out¹¹, the list makes use of the two prepositions to distinguish between the core of Saul's kingdom, introduced by 'al, and its periphery; or, as I would like to phrase it, between Eshbaal's Saulide heritage and areas newly joined to Israel during his reign¹². To explain the non-idiomatic use of the preposition 'el after *himlik* which makes the verb, so to speak, a verb of movement, one might think of telescoping¹³:

ויולכדו אבנר אל הגלעד ומלכדו or וילך אבנר אל הגלעד ומלכדו = וימלכדו אבנר אל הגלעד.

Whether he brought the king with him in person or not, it was in any case Abner who installed Eshbaal as king in Gilead, the valley of Esdraelon, and in the territory of the Ashurite. The acquisition of the Jezreel plain renders the defeat of Saul on Mt. Gilboa an episode without repercussions on the constitution and initial growth of Israel.

1.3. David

The «list of David's military elite» 2 Sam 23,18-39 forms part of the secondary fill which intruded between 2 Sam 20 and 1 Kings 1 (after the «History of the Early Kings», presumably reaching from Saul to Jehu, had been divided into Proto-Samuel and Proto-Kings?). It can only be dated on internal grounds. Insofar as the members of this elite are of Judean or Israelite descent¹⁴, their places of origin spread throughout the Philistine periphery¹⁵. This

⁷ Among the few historians who did not completely neglect Saul's successor, one finds N. Na'aman, *The Kingdom of Ishbaal*: BN 54 (1990) 33-37.

⁸ *waw explicativum*.

⁹ Cf. E.A. Knauf, *War Biblisch-Hebräisch eine Sprache? Empirische Gesichtspunkte zur Annäherung an die Sprache der althebräischen Literatur*: ZAH 3 (1990), 11-23 (20).

¹⁰ Even an easier way out is taken by H.J. Stoebe, *Das zweite Buch Samuelis* (KAT 8,2; 1994) 99, who states that there was no difference in meaning between the two prepositions: the farewell to all philology in biblical studies.

¹¹ ABD V, 996; along the same line of thought, G.W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest*, ed. D. Edelman (SJOT.S 146; 1993) 440f.

¹² Gilead, although an area of Saul's military operation (1 Samuel 11,1-11), where he found loyalty even after his death (1 Samuel 31,11-13; 2 Samuel 2,4), was not necessarily integrated into Saul's framework of power much beyond the only town, Jabesh.

¹³ Cf. Genesis 24,11 המים ויברך הגמלים אל באר המים = ויברך הגמלים = and, similarly, Jeremiah 41,12 ויבאו אל מים רבים אשר מבועין וימצאו ארוז = וימצאו ארוז אל מים רבים אשר מבועין.

¹⁴ Elipelet (23,34) and Jigal (23,36) are Aramaeans, Zelek (23,37) is an Ammonite. Whether Gad (23,36) was, at the time of the original composition of the list, regarded as an Israelite or a Moabite tribe is a moot question (for historical reasons, the reading «Gileadite» [thus Lxx^B] is preferable).

¹⁵ B. Mazar, *The Military Elite of King David*: id., *The Early Biblical Period* (Jerusalem 1986) 83-103; 84 (map); cf. also H.M. Niemann, *Herrschaft, Königtum und Staat. Skizzen zur soziokulturellen Entwicklung im monarchischen Israel* (FAT 6; 1993) 15.

observation lends support to a 10th century dating of the list¹⁶. The evidence from 2 Sam 23 accords well the impression gained from the toponyms embedded in the old narrative tradition, the northernmost of which is, west of the Jordan river, Baal-Hazor (2 Sam 13,23)¹⁷.

2. Evaluation

2.1. Saul

Saul's tiny tribal kingdom emerged at the very periphery of the Philistine periphery. Its location might indicate a certain amount of political antagonism vis-à-vis the dominating power. At the same time, the secondary tribal state was fully dependent on the economic potential of the Philistine system (and be it for plunder and exorcation). Israelite state-formation commenced not only in the very South of the (proto-)Israelite area of settlement, i.e. in the part of Israel most proximate to the Philistine center, the «capital» of the emerging state, Gibeon = Gibeat = Gibeat Saul, was also excentrically placed on its southern border. Eccentric capitals are usually indicative of «strong attractors», political or economical, outside the particular state's territory (Washington D.C., Paris and London serving as prime examples)¹⁸.

2.2. David

The Judeo-Israelite tribal kingdom of David spreads evenly through the Philistine periphery, with a clear concentration of loyalty at Jerusalem and in its vicinity. One might say, it was only under the Philistine system that an «United Kingdom» of Judaeans and Israelite could have been feasible. The Jezreel and the Galilee remained well outside David's sphere of influence. Jerusalem, David's political center, is also the geographical center of the territory under his influence. From an Israelite perspective, Jerusalem is even more eccentric (and even closer to the Philistine core) than Gibeon had been.

One might interpret the picture in traditional terms as indicating that David indeed gained supremacy over the Philistines. In this case, however, it is inconceivable why he did not shift his capital to Ekron or Ashqelon, a comparison of the built-up areas of the three places in the 11th/10th centuries providing conclusive evidence for their relative economic importance and political power:

Ashqelon: 50-60 ha

Ekron: 20 ha

Jerusalem: 4-6 ha¹⁹.

The conclusion is inevitable: David did not only come to power as a Philistine vasall, he remained a Philistine dependant for all his reign. By necessity, the breakdown of the Philistine system ca. 925 BCE was also the end of any «United Kingdom» that might have existed.





¹⁶ The economic system of 7th century Palestine was again Philistia-centered. But the list is oblivious of the Samaritan-Judean border of the 7th century; in addition, Maacah and Zobia had ceased to exist by that time.

¹⁷ The excursion to the non-Israelite far North 2 Sam 20 disregarded; cf. Niemann, FAT 6, 14.

¹⁸ When Russia conquered Finland from Sweden, its capital moved from Turku/Åbo (nearest to Stockholm) to Helsingfors/Helsinki (closer to St. Petersburg).

¹⁹ L.E. Stager, *The Impact of the Sea People in Canaan (1185-1050 BCE)*: T.E. Levy ed., *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (New York 1995) 332-348 (345-347). – For the execution of the map summarizing this article, my sincere thanks are due to Julia Müller-Clemm.

Saul, David and the Philistines

-  = Philistine core area
-  = Philistine periphery
-  = Saul's primary zone of influence (1Sam 9: 4-5; 10: 2-5)
-  = David's zone of influence (2Sam 23: 8-39)

