

Interactions and exchange processes as driving forces of social development in ancient Palestine

Felix Hagemeyer^{1*}

¹Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

*Felix.Hagemeyer@uni-leipzig.de

(Received: 2023/06/15, Published online: 2023/06/24)

In Bronze and Iron Age Palestine, the rugged Judean hill country with its rural hamlets and the rather small urban center of Jerusalem was predominantly characterized by subsistence agriculture.[1] The southern Palestinian coastal plain with the large port cities such as Ashdod, but also Ashkelon and Gaza, profited from fishery, but above all from maritime long-distance trade with Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and the urban settlements in the northern Levant (i.e., Ugarit, Sidon, and Tyre).[2]



Fig. 1. Map of southern Palestine with Bronze and Iron Age settlements (© Gunnar Lehmann, used with kind permission).

Scores of archaeological finds illustrate the economic, social, cultural and religious differences between the Judean hill country and the southern Palestinian coastal plain. For example, in the early Iron Age the emergence of a new material culture, characterized by strong Aegean and Cypriot affinities, left its traces on the coast. Particularly characteristic in this regard is the appearance of locally made monochrome Helladic IIC-style pottery types (the so-called “Philistine Pottery”).[3] This ware was shaped by elaborate ornamentation and numerous local and allochthonous (Aegean, Cypriot, and Egyptian) influences. The Iron Age pottery from the Jerusalem area, in turn, was characterized by a predominantly local character and only small amounts of imports.[4]

Despite many economic, social, cultural, and religious contrasts, the coastal plain and the hill country were affected by multifaceted interactions and exchange processes. Economically, the kings and elites

of Jerusalem were dependent on the ports on the southern Palestinian coast and thus especially on Ashdod, the city closest to the hill country with direct access to the Mediterranean Sea (via the harbors of Tel Mor and later Ashdod-Yam).[5] Only with the help of maritime trade could luxury goods (e.g., perfumes and ointments from the Aegean region) or high-quality building materials (e.g., cedarwood from Lebanon) be imported by the kingdom of Jerusalem/Judah. The Judean highlands were of interest to the coast mainly as a supplier of labor and agricultural products (e.g., wheat and olives).[6]

For the Iron Age, an intensive cultural transfer from the coast to the hill country can be observed, exemplified by the imitation of coastal drinking and tableware in Jerusalem and its environs. Potters in the Judean hill country adopted individual elements of religious imagery from the coastal plain for the production of figurines and cult stands.[7] Sanctuaries in important trade centers (e.g., Moza, Tell es-Safi/Gath) were frequented by mobile individuals such as merchants and traveling artisans and thus functioned as intermediaries for cultural entanglement.[8]

Finally, migration processes testify to a high degree of exchange and mobility between the coast and the hill country. First, such migrations may have been the result of cooperation between the rulers of the coastal kingdoms and Judah, for example, to meet a high demand for labor. Second, voluntary migration of mountain or coastal dwellers or, third, the forced migration by a great power (such as Assyria or Babylonia) would also be conceivable. Important archaeological evidence for population transfer includes e.g., household pottery and figurines (like Judean Pillar Figurines) typical of the coast or hill country, which were excavated at sites in the respective other region. Equally significant in this context are epigraphic finds with unique personal names, which, for example, indicate a specific geographical origin through theophoric elements.[9]

The texts of the Hebrew Bible, the cultural archive or library of ancient Jerusalem/Judah/Palestine, mostly oppose the growing entanglements between Jerusalem and coastal cities such as Ashdod in particular. The scribal elites in the Judean hill country, at least in part, espoused a nationalist mindset and proposed a future conquest of the flourishing coast (e.g., Josh 13:2-6). Other scribes argued for a separation from the manifold influences of Ashdod on Jerusalem, which were perceived as a threat to Judean identity (e.g., Neh 13:23–27). In the late Iron Age texts from the 5th-4th centuries BCE, coastal cities even became a symbol of everything “non-Judean” and the “ultimate other.”[10]

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