

Cult, Craft, and Context: Reassessing the Archaeological Interface of Ritual and Production at Iron Age Tell es-Safi/Gath

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Abstract

The relationship between cultic activity and production has long been recognized as a structural feature of ancient Near Eastern societies, yet it is frequently conceptualized through analytical dichotomies that separate ritual from economic practice. This study presents a comprehensive reassessment of this relationship through a contextually grounded analysis of Iron Age remains from Tell es-Safi/Gath. Focusing on chalices, figurines, and inscriptions within well-defined Iron IIA contexts, and emphasizing their stratigraphic, spatial, and depositional characteristics, the paper demonstrates that ritualized practices permeated domestic, industrial, and formally cultic settings. Rather than proposing a generalized model, the study advances a context-sensitive framework for identifying ritualization within specific archaeological settings. Comparative evidence from Philistia and the southern Levant indicates that these patterns are variable and locally contingent. The results challenge entrenched dichotomies between “official” and “domestic” religion and call for a reassessment of the integration of ritual and production in Iron Age societies.

Keywords: Iron Age; Philistia; southern Levant; ritual; production; archaeology; stratigraphy; material culture

1. Introduction

The entanglement of cultic practice and production activity is one of the most persistent and structurally embedded features of ancient societies. Archaeological and textual evidence from the Bronze and Iron Ages demonstrates repeatedly that processes such as metallurgy, textile production, ceramic manufacture, and agricultural processing were not merely technical or economic activities but were frequently embedded within symbolic and ritual frameworks [1-4]. These associations appear across a wide range of regions and cultural traditions, indicating that they reflect fundamental aspects of social organization rather than isolated phenomena.

Despite this recognition, archaeological interpretation has often relied on dichotomous frameworks, particularly the distinction between “official” or institutional cult and “domestic” or household religion, as well as between sacred and profane domains. While such distinctions have heuristic value, they risk imposing rigid boundaries on practices that were likely fluid and context dependent. Theoretical approaches to ritual increasingly emphasize its performative and situational nature [5-7], suggesting that ritualization may occur within a wide range of activities and settings.

The present study re-examines these issues through the archaeological evidence from the Iron Age site of Tell es-Safi/Gath in central Israel, see Fig. 1. By focusing on specific categories of material culture and their contextual distribution, and by emphasizing stratigraphic integrity and spatial relationships, this paper seeks to evaluate how ritualized practices were embedded within different domains of activity and to reassess conventional distinctions between cult and production.

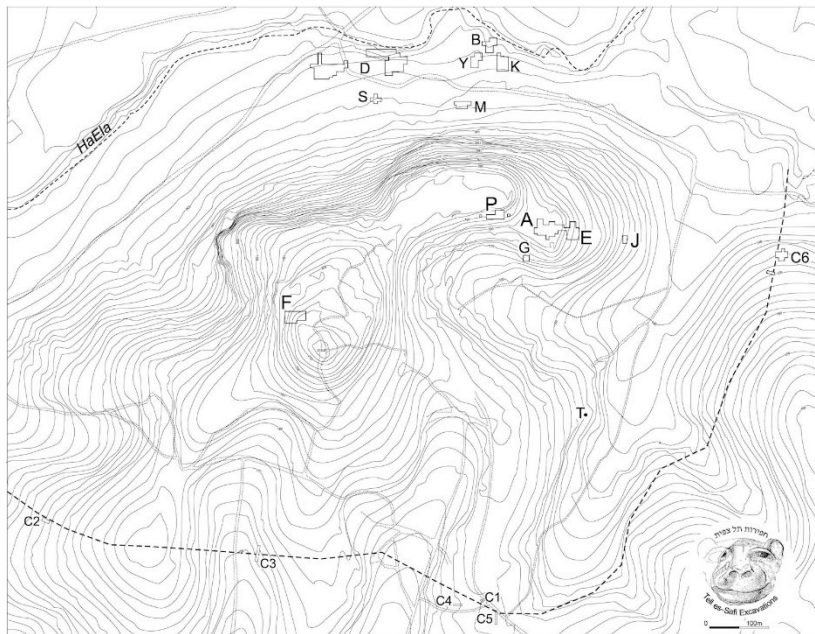


Fig.1. Plan of Tell es-Safi/Gath showing excavation areas.

2. Archaeological Context and Stratigraphy

Philistine Tell es-Safi/Gath provides a particularly robust dataset for examining Iron Age practices due to its extensive excavation and well-preserved stratigraphic sequence. The Iron IIA destruction layer, often associated with the campaign of Hazael of Aram-Damascus in the late ninth century BCE, represents a relatively short-lived depositional horizon that preserves activity areas in situ.

In excavations throughout the site, such as in Areas A and D West, this destruction layer is characterized by collapsed architecture, articulated floor surfaces, and well-defined assemblages of artifacts. Within these contexts, structures interpreted as cultic have been identified based on architectural features and associated finds [8-10]. At the same time, the same stratigraphic horizon yields extensive evidence for production activities.

Throughout the site, metallurgical installations, including metal objects, slag deposits, and tuyères, attest to both iron and bronze production [11-12]. Bone tool workshops provide evidence for specialized craft production [13-14], while textile production is attested by loom weights and spindle whorls [15-18]. Olive oil production is also documented [19].

Importantly, these activities are not spatially segregated. Production installations are often located adjacent to or within structures interpreted as cultic, and objects with potential ritual significance appear in domestic and industrial contexts. This spatial variability suggests that the organization of activities at the site does not conform to strict functional divisions.

3. Methodological Framework

This study adopts a context-sensitive approach grounded in the concept of ritualization [5-6]. Rather than treating objects or spaces as inherently cultic, the analysis focuses on how practices are constituted through their spatial, material, and social contexts.

This requires careful attention to stratigraphy and depositional processes. Distinguishing between primary and secondary contexts, reconstructing activity areas, and analyzing associations between artifacts and architectural features are all essential for interpreting the archaeological record.

4. Chalices

Chalices from the Iron IIA destruction layer represent a key category of evidence. These vessels exhibit a distinctive morphology, with carinated bowls and high pedestal bases, often decorated with post-firing painted motifs [20-21], see Fig. 2.

Organic residue analysis conducted by Gadot et al. [21] demonstrated that these vessels were used for burning aromatic substances, providing direct evidence for their involvement in ritualized practices. However, their distribution across multiple contexts complicates their interpretation.

Chalices are found in temples, domestic units, production areas, and mortuary contexts. Their presence in production contexts suggests that ritualized practices may have been integrated into craft activities, while their occurrence in domestic contexts indicates that ritual practices were embedded within everyday life.



Fig. 2. Chalices from Area A (Stratum A3 destruction level), Tell es-Safi/Gath.

5. Figurines

Figurines from Tell es-Safi/Gath, see Fig. 3, are relatively few and typologically limited [10, 22]. Nevertheless, their presence across domestic, production, and cultic contexts indicates that they were not restricted to formal ritual settings.



Fig. 3. At the left side: Seated figurine from Area A (Stratum A3 destruction level), Tell es-Safi/Gath.

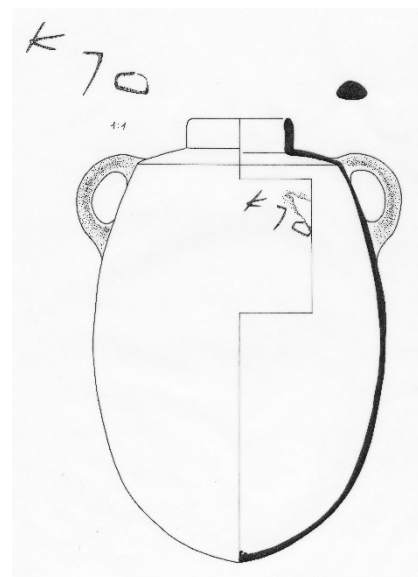


Fig. 4. At the right side: Inscribed jar from Area A (Stratum A3 destruction level), Tell es-Safi/Gath.

Their contextual variability suggests that figurines functioned within a range of practices, including household ritual, symbolic expression, and possibly protective functions. Their presence in production areas may indicate that craft activities were accompanied by symbolic or apotropaic practices.

6. Inscriptions

The inscriptions, see Fig. 4, from Tell es-Safi/Gath provide important evidence for literacy and its contextual distribution [23-25]. Most inscriptions are found in domestic contexts, while a smaller number derive from cultic contexts.

Notably, inscriptions with potential cultic references appear in domestic settings, whereas those from temple contexts do not exhibit explicit religious content. This suggests that literacy and symbolic expression were embedded within everyday practices.

7. Comparative Perspectives

Comparative evidence from sites such as Tel Mique-Ekron and Tel Dan demonstrates similar patterns of interaction between cult and production [26-27] and are found at other sites in Philistine as well, e.g. by Ben-Shlomo [28]. Metallurgical activity associated with ritual contexts is also documented in Cyprus and other sites in the southern Levant [1, 29]. Likewise, a close association between cult and weaving [3, 16, 30, 31] and pottery production and cult [32].

At the same time, variability between sites indicates that these relationships are locally contingent rather than uniform.

8. Discussion

The evidence from Tell es-Safi/Gath demonstrates that ritualization operated across multiple domains and cannot be confined to formally defined cultic spaces. The organic residue analysis of chalices [21], some found in domestic contexts and others in cult-related ones, provides direct evidence for the use of aromatic substances in ritualized practices, while the archaeobotanical data from the Area D temple [33] demonstrates the structured use of plant materials within a clearly defined cultic setting.

The juxtaposition of these datasets highlights the existence of multiple forms of ritual expression operating at different scales and within different contexts. In the temple, ritual practices appear to have been more structured and possibly institutionalized, as reflected in the patterned use of botanical materials. In contrast, the widespread distribution of chalices at the site [20] suggests that similar practices were also enacted in domestic and production settings, albeit in more localized and variable forms.

This variability underscores the need for a context-sensitive approach to the identification of ritual practices. Rather than relying on fixed categories, it is necessary to consider how ritualization is embedded within specific activities and settings. The presence of ritualized practices in production areas suggests that craft activities may have been accompanied by symbolic actions aimed at ensuring success, protection, or legitimacy.

Such practices may be understood as part of a broader system in which economic and symbolic activities were closely intertwined. This perspective challenges traditional dichotomies and supports a more integrated understanding of ritual and production.

9. Conclusions

The archaeological record from Tell es-Safi/Gath provides compelling evidence for the integration of ritual and production in Iron Age Philistine society. The distribution of chalices, figurines, and inscriptions across diverse contexts highlights the permeability of boundaries between cultic and everyday practices.

The combined evidence from residue analysis and archaeobotanical studies further demonstrates that ritual practices operated at multiple scales and within different contexts. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more nuanced understanding of ancient religious practices and suggests that future research should focus on contextual variability rather than categorical distinctions. This complexity fits in well with views on the multifaceted nature of Philistine culture in general, as manifested for example in its diverse technological traditions [34].

This paper is presented to Prof. Dr. Angelika Berlejung in honor of her 65th birthday. Prof. Berlejung, a leading scholar in the fields of biblical studies, biblical history and ancient Near Eastern archaeology [35], who has, inter alia, conducted extensive research on manifestations of cult – and its impact on various aspects of daily life (including production), is a close friend and colleague. I have had the honor of co-directing the Minerva Center for the Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times (RIAB; aramisrael.org) for the last decade and deeply appreciate our joint work.

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