Five Articles about Food Traditions from The Ancient Near East Today

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Chapter One

When Life Gives You Lemons: Tracking the Earliest Citrus in the Mediterranean
One of the most famous Levantine exports of the 20th century was the Jaffa orange, and we have long associated the region with citrus. Today citrus orchards are a major component of the Mediterranean landscape and among the region's most important cultivated fruits. But while citrus is now iconic, it may come as a surprise that it is not native to the Mediterranean Basin; these species originated thousands of miles away, in Southeast Asia. So how did the first citrus arrive in the Mediterranean, and why?

Citrus was first cultivated by humans at least four thousand years ago in Southeast Asia, and all cultivated species derive from a handful of wild ancestors. Several years ago I found the earliest archaeobotanical evidence of citrus within the Mediterranean in a royal Persian garden near Jerusalem dating to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. In
the course of research I traced the spread and diversification of citrus through a variety of historical information, including ancient texts, art, and artifacts such as wall paintings and coins, and by gathering all the available archaeobotanical remains: fossil pollen grains, charcoal, seeds, and other fruit remains.

These botanical remains were evaluated for their reliability (in terms of identification, archaeological context and dating), and other possible interpretations. The data enabled me to understand the spread of citrus from Southeast Asia into the Mediterranean. The citron (citrus medica, better known in the Jewish tradition as the etrog) was the first citrus fruit to reach the Mediterranean, via Persia. The citron has a thick rind and a small, dry pulp, but it was the first to arrive in the west, and for this reason the whole group of fruits (citrus) is named after one of its less economically important members. It was introduced to the Eastern Mediterranean around the 5-4th century BCE and then traveled quickly west. The citron and the lemon (citrus limon, a hybrid of the citron and the bitter orange, which was introduced to the west at least four centuries later) were originally considered elite products. This means that for more than
a millennium, citron and lemon were the only citrus fruits known in the Mediterranean Basin.

The citron was brought to ancient Israel to display the power of the Persian ruler and it slowly penetrated to the Jewish religious and symbolic worlds (the etrog is one of the key species used during the Sukkot holiday and is frequently depicted on coins and mosaics) and then to the central and western Mediterranean. Remains of this species were also found in gardens owned by affluent members of the western Roman world, for example in the area of Vesuvius and around Rome, dated to the 3rd-2nd century BCE. It appears that the citron was considered a valuable commodity due to its healing qualities, symbolic use, pleasant odor and its rarity, such that only the rich could have afforded it. Its spread therefore was helped more by its representation of high social status, its significance in religion, and unique features more


Citron limon or etrog. (Wikimedia Commons).
Citron. (Wikimedia Commons)

Citron fruits alongside a palm branch on a coin of the fourth year of the Great Revolt (69–70 AD). (B)

Citron appears on a coin from the time of Simon bar Kokhba's revolt (132–136 AD).

Two citron fruits alongside a menorah in a magnificent mosaic from the sixth century AD Maon Synagogue (Negev Desert, Israel). Photograph by Clara Amit, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.
than by its culinary qualities (which are somewhat limited).

In contrast, sour orange, lime, and pummelo were introduced to the west much later beginning in the 10th century CE, by the Muslims, probably via Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula. It is clear that Muslims played a crucial role in the dispersal of cultivated citrus in Northern Africa and Southern Europe. This is also evident from the common names of many of the citrus types that are derived from Arabic. The dispersal of these fruits was possible because the Islamic world controlled extensive territory and commercial routes reaching from India to the Mediterranean.

The introduction of the sweet orange is dated even later, to the 15th century CE. Its arrival is probably linked with the trade route established by the Genoese and then in the 16 century CE by the Portuguese. The mandarin, one of the four core citrus species, was only introduced to the Mediterranean region at the beginning of the
19th century. Mediterranean cuisines that feature citrus are thus relatively recent developments, and their appearance in European (and American) diets even later. Today, the Mediterranean produces at least 20% of the world’s citrus.

The spread of these species, and their movement from elite to everyday status, shows how different cultures adapt unusual plants as status symbols of wealth and power, but then spread to all levels of society, influencing economics, diets and nutrition in the process.

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Chapter Two

The Daily Stew? Everyday Meals in Ancient Israel
By Cynthia Shafer-Elliott

Introduction
What did the ancient Israelites eat and how did they cook? Unfortunately, the Hebrew Bible doesn’t contain as much information on daily cooking and meals as one would like. The limited amount of information on food in the Hebrew Bible relates to the kosher dietary laws (Lev. 11), the sacrificial system (Lev. 1-7; Num.), or elite feasting or meals.

For example, 1 Kings 4:22-23 lists the daily provisions for King Solomon’s table: thirty cors of choice flour, sixty corsof meal, ten fat oxen, twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. These are daily provisions for the king and do not reflect what the average ancient Israelite man, woman, or child ate.

Meals in Biblical and Ancient Israel
Textual resources are an important source of information on any ancient society but their original purpose was to provide accounts of monumental people and events such as military conquests and the reigns of kings. Even the Hebrew Bible was written and edited by the literate elite and not the average Israelite man or woman, and as such it infrequently reflects the daily lives of the average person. It should come as no surprise that the Hebrew Bible isn’t especially concerned with what the average Israelite cooked and ate.

We must therefore turn to other sources to understand the daily preparation and consumption of food in Iron Age Israel, especially archaeology. Archaeological evidence related to cooking includes features like ovens and grinding installations,
artifacts such as cooking pots and bowls, and plant and animal remains. Another essential resource is ethnoarchaeology, which observes traditional societies and how they prepare items related to food. Ethnoarchaeology provides insights into food preparation techniques and technologies used by ancient predecessors. A final resource is non-biblical texts that mention food and food preparation, including ancient Near Eastern recipes.

**Meals**

One particular dish is rarely included in discussions of ancient Israelite food and cooking. At the end of the day, the average Israelite meal consisted of a stew. Meat was not consumed on a regular basis by the average Israelite, so most stews were made from legumes and vegetables. This can be seen in the use of the Hebrew word nazid, which is used to describe stews (or pottage) of vegetables and/or legumes (Gen. 25:29, 34; 2 Kgs. 4:38–40; Hag. 2:12).

The Hebrew Bible seldom mentions vegetables (1 Kings 21:2), but many vegetables are native to the area and have been cultivated for millennia, including carrots, cucumbers, onions, garlic, and field greens. Legumes found in Israel include lentils,
peas, chickpeas, broad beans, and bitter vetch. Legumes are a good source of vegetable protein, which was imperative in a society that ate little meat. Mesopotamian texts also exhibit the preference for stews in the ancient Near East. One Assyrian source mentions at least 100 different soups or stews. Babylonian recipes for stews are made from ingredients such as vegetables, legumes, and both fresh and not-so-fresh meats.

**How Were Stews Prepared?**

Stews were prepared in cooking pots placed in or on top of an oven, on or next to a hearth, or suspended over an open fire and could have been prepared in any type of cooking pots, depending on the size of the ingredients and the amount to be prepared.
The cooking vessel evolved throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages and looked more like a bowl with a profiled rim and rounded base. With its open mouth, wide shape, and heat resistant ceramic ware the pot was used for several types of cooking, including steaming, frying, simmering, and boiling. The smallest cooking vessel was more of a jug than a pot and appeared with the arrival of the Philistines. The jug had a more closed mouth and one or two loop handles. The jug’s thin walls were useful for slow, 9th century cooking pots. Photo courtesy of Prof. Aren Maeir, Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project
The low-heat cooking of liquid dishes and its flat base allowed it to rest directly on or near the heat source. An Iron Age hybrid version combined the rounded body and open mouth of the Bronze-Age pot with the handles and shape of the Philistine jug.

Excavated ovens uncovered are usually incomplete but ethnoarchaeological studies show that they resemble the modern tannur type used throughout the Middle East. A tannur is a conical or beehive-shaped clay oven that stands about one meter high. It has a large opening at its top that allows access to the inside. The opening is often covered with a lid to retain heat and as a cooking surface. Many modern examples include an opening at the bottom as a flue. Dough is slapped onto the interior walls to bake, while cooking pots could be placed inside, over the top opening, or on the lid. The term tannur is found in the Hebrew Bible 15 times, seven of which refer to an oven used to bake bread (Exod. 8:3; Lev. 2:4, 7:9, 11:35, 26:26; Hos. 7:4, 6–7).

Excavations of Iron Age houses find the remains of ovens both inside and outside the house. Indoor ovens are often found in the main living area where multiple household chores were performed, usually near an entryway. Outside ovens are located in adjacent courtyards. Having both indoor and outdoor ovens suggests that food (as well as other chores) were prepared inside the house during the rainy winter months and outside during the hot summer months. The central location of ovens also permitted other household tasks to be conducted while preparing food and for the sharing of ovens and fuel (Lev. 26:26).

Philistine style cooking jugs from Tel Miqne and Tel es-Safi. From D. Ben Shlomo et al. Cooking Identities: Aegean-Style Cooking Jugs in the Southern Levant, and Cultural Interaction between the Philistines and Their Neighbors during the Iron Age, American Journal of Archaeology 112 (2008): 225-246, Figure 3.
Stews and the Israelite Household

Exploring various aspects of food preparation not only helps us understand the diet and meals of ancient Israel, but also the ancient Israelite household. In ancient societies like Israel, the household economy was an important part of daily life and operated on a subsistence level. The preference for stews made from vegetables and legumes supports the idea that the average Israelite household depended on herds and only occasionally ate meat. The household herd (primarily sheep and goats) provided secondary products, such as wool, milk, and dung for fuel.

Meat was reserved for special occasions, such as a wedding (Gen. 29:22; Judg.)
14:10; see Tob. 7:13–14), or religious/agricultural feast (Deut. 16:1–17; Exod. 23:14–17; Lev. 23:4–25; Num. 10:10; Ps. 81:3; 2 Chr. 8:12–13; Hos. 2:11; Amos 8:5, and 1 Sam. 20: 5-6). Ethnoarchaeological studies show that traditional societies in the Middle East include meat in a daily meal if it was hunted wild game, from the household herd that needed to be culled, or if the household needed ready cash. It follows that the preference for stews in ancient Israel was a financial decision more than a culinary preference. We are all familiar with the biblical phrase “our daily bread”; in light of archaeological and textual sources, perhaps we should refine it to include “our daily bread and stew”?

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Chapter Three

Göbekli Tepe: Neolithic Gathering and Feasting at the Beginning of Food Production
A few kilometres northeast of modern Şanlıurfa in south-eastern Turkey, the tell of Göbekli Tepe is situated on the highest point of the otherwise barren Germuş mountain range. Rising 15 metres and with an area of about 9 hectares, the completely man-made mound covers the earliest known monumental cult architecture in the ancient Near East. Constructed by hunter-gatherers right after the end of the last Ice Age, they also intentionally buried it about 10,000 years ago.

Göbekli Tepe has been known to archaeologists since the 1960s, when a joint survey team from the Universities of Istanbul and Chicago under the direction of Halet Çambel and Robert Braidwood observed numerous flint artefacts littering the surface of the mound. However, the monumental architecture remained undetected, and was eventually discovered by Klaus Schmidt on a grand tour of important south-eastern Turkish Neolithic sites in 1994. In addition to the high density of flint tools and flakes, his eye was caught by large limestone blocks which reminded him of another nearby Neolithic site where he had worked several years before: Nevalı Çori – where, among others, a building with monolithic T- pillars was discovered for the first time. These peculiar T-shapes reminded Schmidt of the worked stone peeking out of the surface at Göbekli Tepe. Excavations at this site began the next year.

In about 22 years of ongoing fieldwork, the German Archaeological Institute and the Şanlıurfa Museum have revealed a totally unexpected monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe, dating to the earliest Neolithic period. No typical domestic structures have yet been found, leading to the interpretation of Göbekli Tepe as a ritual centre for gathering and feasting. The people creating these megalithic monuments were still highly mobile hunter-foragers and the site’s material culture corroborates this: substantial amounts of bones exclusively from hunted wild animals, and a stone tool inventory comprising a wide range of projectile points. Osteological investigations and botanical studies show that animal husbandry was not practiced at Göbekli Tepe and domesticated plants were unknown.
It is currently possible to distinguish two different phases at Göbekli Tepe although this will undoubtedly change with continued research. The site is characterised by an older layer dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) A period (ca. 9,600-8,800 calBC) which produced monumental circular huge T-shaped pillars arranged in circle-like enclosures around two even taller central pillars and a younger layer, early and middle PPN B (c. 8,800-7,000 calBC) in date. It consists of smaller rectangular buildings containing often only two small central pillars or even none at all. These may be reduced variations (or later adaptations) of the older and considerably larger monuments, of which four were
excavated in the main excavation area in the mound’s southern depression. Notably these structures, labelled Enclosures A, B, C, and D, were apparently backfilled intentionally at the end of their use-lives. Enclosure D, the best preserved of the circular buildings, serves to give an impression of the general layout and set-up of these enclosures.
In the centre two colossal pillars, measuring about 5.5 m, are founded in shallow pedestals carved out of the carefully smoothed bedrock. This central pair of pillars is surrounded by a circle formed of similar, but slightly smaller pillars which are connected by stone walls and benches. While these surrounding pillars often are decorated with depictions of animals like foxes, aurochs, birds, snakes, and spiders, the central pair in particular illustrates the anthropomorphic character of the T-pillars. They clearly display arms depicted in relief on the pillars’ shafts, with hands brought together above the abdomen, pointing to the middle of the waist. Belts and loincloths underline this impression and emphasize the human-like appearance of these pillars. Their larger-than-life and highly abstracted representation is intentionally chosen and not owed to deficient craftsmanship, as other finds like the much more naturalistic animal and human sculptures clearly demonstrate. This suggests that whatever the larger-than-life T-pillars are meant to depict and embody is on a different level than the life-sized sculptures in the iconography of Göbekli Tepe and the Neolithic in Upper Mesopotamia.

While naturalistic and abstract depictions find their most monumental manifestation on the T-shaped pillars, there are others. Similar and clearly related iconography also occurs on functional objects like so-called shaft straighteners, on stone bowls and cups, as well as on small stone tablets which apparently do not have any other function than to bear these signs. Furthermore, these objects are not restricted to Göbekli Tepe
and the few other sites with T-shaped pillars in its closer vicinity, but are known from places up to 200 km around the site. A spiritual concept seems to have linked these sites to each other, suggesting a larger cultic community among PPN mobile groups in
Upper Mesopotamia, tied in a network of communication and exchange.

Ethnologic and historic analogies emphasize the importance of regular gatherings and collective activities as means of maintaining social cohesion in hunter-gatherer communities. Gatherings also serve other purposes like the exchange of information, goods, and marriage partners. Such large-scale gatherings naturally need to be established in locations that are known and easily accessible for the participating groups.

The topographical situation of Göbekli Tepe as a landmark overlooking the surrounding plains, seem a perfectly suitable central space for these groups and people inhabiting the wider region. Large communal tasks executed as collective work events, reflected
in the apparently continuous construction activity at Göbekli Tepe, provided a unifying reason for people to come together. Additionally ethnographic studies provide more examples demonstrating that work forces necessary for such collaborative projects can be gathered with the prospect of lavish feasts.

That this may have been the case at Göbekli Tepe is further corroborated by a closer look at the massive amount of filling material of the enclosures, which consists of limestone rubble, flint artefacts, fragments of stone vessels, other ground stone tools, and in particular an impressively large numbers of animal bones – above all gazelle and aurochs. These remains hint at the consumption of enormous amounts of meat, most likely during feasts framing these large-scale meetings and communal activities, including monument construction.

Detail of Pillar 18 showing hands, belt, and loincloth in relief. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI).

One of the limestone heads found at Göbekli Tepe, the breaking edge in the neck area indicating that these once were part of larger, life-sized sculptures. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI)
View into Enclosure D in the main excavation area. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI)

Collection of plaquettes bearing iconographic symbolism from Göbekli Tepe. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI)
Repetitive feasting at Göbekli Tepe may have played an essential role not only in creating and strengthening social bonds among the individuals and groups meeting there, but must also have stressed the economic potential of these hunter-gatherers to repeatedly feed such large crowds. In response to this pressure, new food resources
and processing techniques may have been explored, subsequently paving the way for a complete change in subsistence strategy. In this scenario, the early appearance of monumental religious architecture motivating work feasts to draw as many hands as possible for the execution of complex, collective tasks is changing our understanding of one of the key moments in human history: the emergence of agriculture and animal husbandry – and the onset of food production and the Neolithic way of live.

Jens Notroff and Oliver Dietrich are research assistants in the Göbekli Tepe project of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), excavations at Göbekli Tepe are carried out in close cooperation with the Şanlıurfa Haleplibahçe Museum. Archaeobiological research is conducted by the Institute of Palaeoanatomy, Domestication Research and the History of Veterinary Medicine, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. The project is funded by the DAI and the German Research Foundation (DFG). For more insight into ongoing research at the site see their blog at “The Tepe Telegrams.”
Chapter Four

Cooking in the Hebrew Bible
It is an understatement to say that within US culture there is a keen interest in food. Turn on any TV and one will see entire channels dedicated to the cooking and eating of food, with chefs becoming minor celebrities. Our interest in food has spilled over into the academic realm where research into diet and the cooking of food in ancient societies has become a “hot” topic. Archaeological excavations of Iron Age Syro-Palestine houses typically find activity areas dedicated for baking and cooking located in the central indoor living space and the outdoor courtyard. These activity areas are recognized through the identification of food preparation technologies (such as ovens and cooking pots) and micro remains (such as carbonized cereals and animal bones with butchering marks). Furthermore, experimental archaeology, ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological studies have become invaluable sources of analogy. As a result of
archaeological, textual, and ethnographic studies, more research into the types of meals and how they were prepared is available, consequently allowing us to learn more about the daily lives of the average ancient Israelite man, woman, and child.

The most basic food staple to the majority of ancient societies was bread. Indeed, bread was the foundation of ancient Israel’s diet so much so that the Hebrew word for bread, lechem, is synonymous with food. There were two types of bread dough: unleavened (matza) and leavened (chametz). Grain was ground daily into flour using grinding stones or pestles and mortars. In order to grind a large amount of grain, one large immobile stone or slab and a smaller stone were used, rubbing back and forth against the grain that was placed between them. Dough was kneaded on a wooden board or trough, which were placed on a bench or on the floor near the oven. Unleavened bread is a mixture of flour and water, plus a pinch of salt that is kneaded into dough. Unleavened bread could be prepared quickly since it did not need time to rise and was often made when guests suddenly arrived; on the other hand, it could not be stored for long. (Gen. 18:6; Jud. 6:19; I Sam. 28:4).

Leavened dough used the same basic recipe but a yeast product such as sourdough (derived from dough left out to ferment) or brewer’s yeast (derived from brewing beer)
was added to the dough. Leavened dough was fuller, more filling, and kept longer than unleavened dough. Both types of bread were baked on hot stones or griddles over an open fire, like a saj (Lev. 7:9; Isa. 44:19) (see Fig 1) or in the tannur or tabun type oven (Lev. 26:26) (more on oven types below). There were varieties of bread depending upon: the type, quality, and color of flour used, the type and amount of kneading, the additives and flavors, baking methods, presentation, geographic origin and use. Some of the ingredients added to dough included ghee, dates, milk, cheese, fruits, and sesame oils. Loaves of bread might accompany the meal or be served as part of the main dish. For instance, dough was divided and arranged on platters to retain its shape, served with a meat or vegetable stew, or in the form of dumplings (II Sam. 13:8) (Borowski 2002, 73; Bottero 1995, 11-13; Curtis 2001, 205; Ebeling and Yorke 2004).

The Israelite diet was dependent upon cereals that were used for porridges as well as for bread. Porridge was an ideal morning meal since it was relatively fast, easy, and required small amounts of raw ingredients, making them quite economical (Prov. 31:15). In ancient Israel, porridge was made out of spelt/emmer, barley, lentils, and chickpeas that were ground using a stone pestle and mortar. People spent their day tending to their herds and fields; as a result of this, they may have had to travel some distance and were unlikely to return home for a midday meal. Rather lunch would have been a ‘picnic’ of bread, cheese, yogurt, dried fruit, parched grain, water, and seasonal vegetables and fruit (Ruth 2:14). Midday meals were raw and light even for those who were doing their daily activities at home. The main hot meal was consumed at the end of the workday and prepared by those whose activities were centered at home. The typical main hot meal was a soup or stew, which were mostly made from lentils, legumes and vegetables since meat was not consumed on a regular basis. The Hebrew word for stew, nazid, is used to describe stews of vegetables.

Stews were also made when meat or other animal parts, fresh or otherwise, were available. Meat was acquired by hunting wild game or, on the rare occasion, when an animal from the herd was slaughtered (Gen. 27:3-4; Gen. 18:7; Jud. 6:19; 1 Sam. 28:24). When an animal was butchered nothing went to waste; the entire animal was butchered, skinned, chopped and made into stews – the most economical of meat dishes. Ancient societies, like Israel, were reliant upon their herds for their secondary products (including wool, milk, and dung for fuel); thus they were unlikely to butcher animals (most likely goats or sheep) in order to eat meat, unless there was a special occasion like a wedding or hospitality feast. The inability to consume an entire animal before it spoiled encouraged reciprocal exchanges within households, extended families or entire settlements. Bread was regularly served with a stew, as bread cakes (‘uga in Gen. 18:6), or dumplings within the stew (lebibot in 2 Sam. 13:6, 8, 10). Roasted grain seeds that were soaked and preserved in a loaf or bread cake were often crumbled on top of the broth or stew to thicken it, and to provide it with a “burnt” flavor. On the occasion that a large quantity of meat or even an entire animal was prepared, roasting was the preferred and most simple mode of cooking. Pieces of meat were roasted on a plate, rack, or screen made of metal or clay, which was placed on top of the upper opening of the oven. If an entire animal was to be cooked and consumed because of hospitality or for special occasions such as feasts or festivals, it was likely roasted over an open fire or in a pit (Isa. 44: 16, 19) (Bottero 2001, 57, 70; Shafer-Elliott 2013, 129-31).

Meals were prepared using a few types of ovens and cooking pots. Ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological studies show that the simplest type of oven is the saj, which technically isn’t an oven but rather a rounded metal disk resting on rocks over an open fire. The thin flaps of dough were placed onto the saj and quickly browned on each side. An ancient ancestor to the saj could have been a hot stone that was placed directly in the fire (Isa. 44:19) or rested on rocks above it, or perhaps the ancient griddle or baking tray (machavat) (Lev. 2:9, 6:21, 7:9; Ezek. 4:3) The arrival of the Philistines introduced a new cooking installation, the stone-made hearth, where cooking pots and bread dough were placed directly on it or at its side. Within the Hebrew Bible, several words for hearth are used albeit mostly in cultic or religious contexts (moqeda in Lev. 6:9; yequd in Isa. 30:14; ‘ari’el in Ezek. 43:15-6) (Daviau
The two most common oven types were the tabun and tannur. A tabun is a dome-shaped oven made of clay, while a tannur is a beehive-shaped clay oven. Ethnoarchaeological studies show that a fire fueled by kindling and animal dung was built on the floor of the tannur or tabun and the ashes raked out of a secondary opening, before the dough was slapped onto the interior walls or even the floor to bake. Platters and cooking pots were also placed on top of the upper opening and used for baking or cooking respectively. Although most archaeological reports refer to household ovens as a tabun, they are more like the tannur type of oven. The term tannur is found in the Hebrew Bible fifteen times, seven of which refer to an oven used to bake bread (Ex. 8:3; Lev. 2:4, 7:9; 11:35; 26:26; Hos. 7:4, 6-7) (McQuitty 1984b, 261; McQuitty 1984a, 56; van der Steen 1991, 135).

Most meals were prepared in cooking vessels that evolved throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages and were heavily influenced by the arrival of the Philistines. In the Hebrew Bible, words for cooking pots include parur (Num. 11:8; Judg. 6:19; 1 Sam. 2:14); sir (Ex. 16:3; 2 Kings 4:38-41; Jer. 1:13; Ezek. 11:3, 7, 11; Mic. 3:3; Zech. 14:20-21); qallachat (1 Sam. 2:14; Micah 3:3); and dud (2 Sam. 2:14). Simply put, cooking vessels can be categorized into three basic forms: the Bronze Age or traditional pot or bowl, the Philistine jug, and the hybrid pot.

The cooking pots found within Bronze Age Canaan and later Israel evolved from a simple and common bowl-shaped vessel. The typical pot of the Bronze Age was a large, handless, open-mouthed pot that allowed the pot to be used for several types of cooking, including steaming, frying, simmering, and boiling. It also was used for cooking larger food items like meat and for serving larger groups of people. The
traditional pots were placed either inside the tabun/tannur, covering its upper opening, or against the stones of hearth, while those with handles could be suspended over an open fire (Killebrew 1999; 84, 92-95, 106-109).

At the end of the late Bronze Age and into the early Iron I Age, a new type of cooking vessel appeared with the arrival of the Philistines. Generally speaking, the shape of the new vessel was less like a bowl and more like a small jug, which prohibited multiple types of cooking and was most likely used for the simmering of low-heat liquid dishes. Soot marks on the sides of the jugs suggest that they were placed directly over an open fire or leaned on a hearth. The typical small size of the jug also dictates the amount of cereals or vegetables cooked within it, indicating smaller portions and consumption by fewer people (Ben Shlomo et al 2008, 225-246; Gur-Arieh et al 2011, 349-55; Killebrew 1999, 93-95, 107).

A different type of cooking pot came to be widely used during the end of the Iron Age I and into Iron Age II. The Bronze Age pot and Philistine jug merged to create a hybrid cooking pot, with slightly varying forms. The most practical features of the pot and jug were combined: the rounded body and open mouth of the Bronze Age pot, with the handles and shape of the Philistine jug. Depending on the type of cooking ware used, the hybrid pot could have been used for rapid, high temperature cooking as well as for slow, low heat cooking. The size of the pot dictated whether it was used for small or
large foodstuffs, and the quantity of ingredients. A hybrid pot could have been placed in a fire pit, suspended over a fire if it had handles, next to or on top of a hearth, inside a tannur/tabun, and, according to some reconstructions, covering the upper opening of the tannur/tabun (Ben Shlomo et al. 2008, 225-246; Killebrew 1999; 93-95, 107).

The daily activities of the average ancient Israelites were mainly concerned with surviving off the land. The household economy was a perilous one; one that was dependent upon the participation of each member of the household regardless of sex and age. Many of the household activities focused on the production, preparation, distribution, and consumption of foodstuffs. The technologies and techniques of cooking in ancient Israel reflect the concerns of the household economy – the lack of meat consumption, the dependency upon crops of availability like cereals and lentils, and the preparation of cost-effective stews, just to name a few. It is my hope that the current interest in food and drink in the ancient Near East will continue. The benefits of this trend are wide reaching, including the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the daily activities of the average man, woman, and child in ancient Israel.

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Bibliography


Chapter Five
Hogging the Attention: Cuisine and Culture in Ancient Israel
The Iron Age of Ancient Israel (1200 – 586 BCE) includes the rise and decline of two well known cultural groups. The interactions between Israel and their nemesis the Philistines are described in the Old Testament that emphasized the differences between their cultures, heritage, and general ways of life. One of those distinctions was the observance of consumption taboos; Israelites did not eat pork products whereas the Philistines had no such dietary restriction. Thus, pork consumption has long been thought to be a hallmark of Philistine culture while pig avoidance a practice consistent with Israelite identity. Evidence unearthed at some archaeological excavations has been cited in support this simple dichotomy. But what is the nature of this evidence? And do such data represent an accurate and reliable marker for a group’s ethnicity? And finally, are there other ways in which this evidence can be interpreted?
As archaeology gradually matured as a scientific discipline, methods advanced toward new techniques to investigate the ancient past. One of these approaches, known as zooarchaeology, centered on the study of animal remains from archaeological sites. Zooarchaeologists examine bones and teeth and, if the remains are well preserved, can identify the species of animal to which they belong. Zooarchaeologists are therefore uniquely qualified to discuss diet and general animal exploitation.

Zooarchaeological evidence demonstrates that Philistines raised more pigs, (Sus scrofa), than Israelites who seemed to have comparatively little interest in hog management. Pigs from some Philistine sites make up as much as 20-30% of the animals used. In contrast, contemporary sites occupied by non-Philistines mainly include other common domesticated stock such as sheep, goats, and cattle and many failed to produce even a single pig bone or tooth amongst the thousands of animal remains. These discoveries have been and continue to be accepted by many scholars as ironclad and irrefutable confirmation of the biblical narrative, that a presence of pig equals Philistine culture while an absence of pig reflects Israelite society. This argument even seems to gain momentum if one considers the zooarchaeological data from the preceding Bronze Age. Pigs were exploited during this earlier phase but
typically on a much smaller scale. Although it is certainly possible that these culinary pursuits aligned with ethnic preferences, let us consider Philistine and Israelite spheres more closely.

Elevated pig consumption coincides with the early stages of the Philistines’ appearance in the region during the 12th and 11th century BCE. Approximately 50 years later, in the mid-11th century BCE, pigs were not used as often, a decline which continues into the 10th century BCE. In fact, the scale of Philistine swine operations never returns to that of original levels; as time progressed the Philistine diet actually trended away from pig use. By the latter stages of Philistine occupation in the 7th century BCE, pig remains comprise less than 5% of the animals used, a rate comparable to contemporary non-Philistine communities. Therefore, swine popularity amongst the Philistines was restricted to a specific period of time, lasting approximately a century.

If pigs were a staple of Philistine culture, one would expect their use to be more widespread across time. But the highest period of heightened pig exploitation occurs with the arrival of the Philistines into the southern Levant from a distant land, suggested by many scholars to be somewhere in the Aegean world. As a new emigrant population, the Philistines faced challenges typical of initial settlement. Pig husbandry would be a good strategy for new settlers, allowing them to quickly establish their animal resource base. This is not only because sows (female pigs) birth large litters of piglets, but because the pig’s omnivorous diet efficiently converts a wide range of edible materials into exploitable pork products.

But what accounts for the decline in hog production and consumption?
Two suggestions can be offered. One is that the initial advantage gained by pig raising was eventually lost when immigrant economies stabilized, during which time pigs were gradually and systematically replaced by animals capable of producing secondary products, for example dairy products, sheep wool, goat hair, and cattle traction. Another reason for the decline in pig use may relate to the Philistines’ exposure to local cultures and their willingness to incorporate some of these foreign cultural elements into their own society. This process is evident in several categories of the Philistine material culture such as pottery, writing systems, figurines, architecture, and even jewelry. It is possible that cultural interaction with foreign groups eventually led to an adjustment in the Philistine animal economy.

The abundance of pigs varies within and between Philistine sites. In some large Philistine cities and towns pork consumption was not evenly represented throughout the architectural units. Thus, pigs appear intended for specific members of the community with perhaps a connection to social rank. Recent work has also demonstrated that pigs are rare at Philistine villages but more common in Philistine cities. This spatial variation in Philistine pig use between urban centers and rural areas makes an ethnic linkage more problematic.
In contrast, pigs are either present in very low numbers or are completely absent at Israelite sites occupied during the United Monarchy of the early Iron Age and later Iron Age sites of the Divided Monarchy. But there are reasons for the absence or lack of hogs that may be unrelated to ethnicity. For example, if a group lived in a particularly hot and dry region, pigs would not be the animal of choice because their physiology does not allow them to thrive in such conditions. Pig avoidance may also relate to concerns involving hygiene. If, as some scholars believe, the Israelites were once nomadic pastoralists, their cultural origins may explain why pigs were not used in later periods. Non-sedentary mobile groups moving from place to place with the seasonal availability of water and pasture tend not to raise pigs since they are more difficult to handle than other herd animals such as sheep, goats, or cattle. Thus, pig avoidance may represent an echo of the Israelites’ former existence before their communities became more sedentary. We may also consider the relationship between animal management and local political hierarchical arrangements. Since pigs yield few secondary products compared to other barnyard stock, their production is often discouraged by powerful external administrations that demand receipt of taxes and tribute. This is especially true when such debts are paid with pork, their primary product.

One of the goals of Iron Age research in the southern Levant is understanding cultural identities based on material remains, and extent to which archaeologists may identify a particular site with the Philistines, Israelites, Canaanites, Egyptians, Phoenicians, or others. Acknowledging the difficulty in this, some have proposed that consumption taboos involving pork represents one of the main indicators of ethnic Philistine identity. Despite a range of other factors that must be considered, as outlined above, many still cling steadfast to this argument.

Unfortunately we have no way of knowing just how early Israelite food taboos were institutionalized and became part of their cultural identity. Some curious finds that complicate an easy view of Israelite food taboos are also worthy of mention. A skeleton of a nearly intact adult pig was found at Hazor, a city in the northern Kingdom of Israel. Although the catfish (Clarias gariepinus) is known at Judean Iron Age sites such as Lachish and the City of David in Jerusalem, it would normally be regarded as non-kosher because it does not possess scales.

The occasional presence of non-kosher species in Israelite contexts could reflect
the gradual definition of consumption taboos. However, these discoveries may instead reflect varying adherence to cultural ideals, with some more relaxed in their observances and others were more strict, and perhaps even people somewhere in the middle. Since variations in observances of kosher laws are also evident in the modern era, it may be more realistic to consider whether similar sentiments were also practiced in antiquity. Pigs may thus remind us of the complexity of human nature and why archaeology has so much to contribute to the thoughtful study of what makes different cultures unique.
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