All in All, It’s Just Another Stone in the Wall:
From Safi to Sicily, 12th century Monumental Architecture in the Mediterranean

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Abstract

Worked stone architecture in Philistia is rare and usually limited to highly visible elements such as column bases, ritual features such as altars, and pavements. Our contribution presents a study of a selected group of minimally preserved but nonetheless important Iron I monumental buildings in Areas A and C at Tell es-Safi/Gath. These remains are situated within the context of what is known about “Sea Peoples’” architecture in the Mediterranean as seen at the 12th century BCE “Anaktoron” at Pantalica, Sicily and architectural changes in Sardinia. Our study demonstrates that monumental architecture was more widespread in the early Philistine period than originally thought.

Introduction: Worked stone in Philistia has been frequently limited to highly visible elements such as column bases, pavements, and ritual features such as altars (Hitchcock and Maeir 2017). This contribution presents a study of a selected group of Iron I monumental buildings and building elements in Areas A and C at Tell es-Safi/Gath. These remains can be potentially situated within the context of what is known about Sea Peoples’ architecture in the Mediterranean as seen at 12th century BCE “Anaktoron” at Pantalica, Sicily and in changes in Final Bronze Age Sardinia. Stratigraphic excavations of the Iron IIB siege tower in the lower city in Area C, at Tell es-Safi/Gath indicate that the tower was built on the foundations of an

1 Authors are responsible for the following sections: SG-A for the Tell es-Safi/Gath, Area C, tower; MH-S for Tell es-Safi/Gath, Area A and drawings; LAH for overall comments and on the Tell es-Safi/Gath tower; AMM for Tell es-Safi/Gath and overall comments; PM for Pantalica; LP for Sardinia. It is with great pleasure we present this article to our dear friend and colleague Jeffrey Chadwick whose interest in architectural planning and modularity in the biblical world (e.g. Chadwick 2020) resonates strongly with Hitchcock’s (1997: esp. 246-47, n. 20 on the pitfalls of metrology) and Militello’s (2017) interests in modularity, architectural planning and design in Minoan Crete and in Sicily. LAH’s research was funded by the University of Melbourne’s Special Studies and Universal Grant Program. LAH’s and PM’s research was further supported by the University of Catania, the University of Heidelberg, and the DAAD.
earlier Iron I building (Gur-Arieh and Maeir 2020).\footnote{For the early (Iron IB) phase of the gate in Area D East, see Maeir (2020).} This earlier building has been interpreted as a temple based on the ceramic and faunal remains associated with it as well as its rectangular layout. The monumentality of the building is indicated by the size of its blocks, three of which were drawn and cataloged by Hitchcock at the suggestion of Maeir. However, for an alternative interpretation assigning the blocks to layer C6-2a dated to the Iron IIA period, see Gur-Arieh and Maeir (2020). Remains of a similarly monumental Iron I wall uncovered and catalogued in the final season conducted in Area A on the eastern side of the upper city at Tell es-Safi/Gath are discussed below. Although the Area A structure was not completely excavated due to the closure of Area A, it demonstrates that monumental architecture was more widespread at early Philistine Gath than originally thought. In addition, we will argue in this article that the tradition of worked masonry survives the Late Bronze to Iron Age transition and that it was broadly spread throughout the Mediterranean. In doing so, we begin also recognizing the western Mediterranean component of the Sea Peoples’ traditions.

**Coastal and Island Networks:** Our map (Fig. 1) combines data from Galvin’s (1999) map of modern piracy routes and Crielaard’s 1998 map of 12th century BCE trade routes in the Mediterranean to present several kinds of information. Among the things depicted on the map are the sites mentioned in this article, possible geographical choke points that could have made ships vulnerable to attack, potential long-distance maritime routes and micro-routes (see Bell 2005). These routes extend from the Atlantic to Cyprus, showing how Cypriot goods and eastern Mediterranean ideas might have travelled west via a Sardinian network. Though Crielaard focuses on the 11th-10th centuries BCE, Italian objects were coming into the eastern Mediterranean before and after the Bronze to Iron Age transition. In addition to more mundane
items such as handmade burnished ware (e.g. papers in Karageorghis and Kouka 2011) and a broad assortment of other objects, the Italian connection is dramatically illustrated by the bronze Italian razor and Naue II sword found in a house in 12th century BCE or LM IIIC Kastrokephala, in Crete; (Kanta and Kontopodi 2011). This era was preceded by the well-known era of internationalization characterized by globalized flows (e.g., Bremmer 2018; Hitchcock 2020a) or transmissions of objects, ideas, technology, and peoples – both free and unfree.

Tell es-Safi/Gath is prominent among the post-collapse sites in the Mediterranean. It is one of five major cities in the Philistine “Pentapolis” mentioned in the Bible and it is famously associated with the story of the giant Goliath. Along with Tel Miqne-Ekron, it is situated in the Shephelah, which served as a border zone between the coastal plain to the west and the central hill country to the east in modern Israel. Literary traditions and archaeology associate it with a migration of so-called “Sea-Peoples” from different parts of the Mediterranean (e.g. Hitchcock and Maeir 2018). In excavating some of the earliest remains on the tell, poor construction skills, reuse, or later disturbances frequently resulted in uncertainty with regard to identifying walls of the 12th century BCE (Hitchcock 2019). This phenomenon is also evident at other sites, as on Crete at the defensible settlement at Kavousi-Vronda where the identification of walls was uncertain enough to be referred to as “Linear Accumulations” (e.g., Day et al. 2012). Thus, it can sometimes be unclear how many stones make a wall (e.g. Cline 2017).

At the north end of Area A at Tell es-Safi/Gath, where the deposit is deeper as a result of sloping terrain, Hitchcock, Maeir and Harris-Schober were surprised to uncover a monumental wall separated from a later, 9th century BCE wall built on top of it by a thin layer of fill (Fig. 2). Between the earlier wall and the later one, there was a striking change in pottery style from Iron
IIA to early Iron I, as well as a striking change in soil color (Figs. 3a-c). The stones that formed the earlier wall are enormous with two of them measuring approx. 0.8 x 0.9 m. The west faces of two of the stones are flat, while the sides and back are cut back to form a trapezoidal shape with smaller stones filling the interstices. The result is a stone with five worked faces (Begg 2004) illustrating a technique G.R.H. Wright (1997-1998) termed “bastard” ashlar. This technique was common in 13th century BCE Cyprus, where it is especially evident at Alassa-Palaiotaverna (Hitchcock 2003) as well as in earlier Minoan ashlar architecture.

Area C below and to the east of the tell of Tell es-Safi/Gath is known as the site of a 9th century BCE tower and siege trench created by the forces of Hazael, King of Aram Damascus, who besieged and destroyed Gath in approximately 830 BCE. However, its study by Shira Gur-Arieh and Maeir (2020) indicate it was constructed on monumental foundation walls of the 12th century BCE. These earlier walls were reused in the construction of the tower. Finds that were associated with this tower took the form of decorated Mycenaean style pottery and faunal remains, which indicate the presence of a feasting area, possibly a temple or at least a building with ceremonial activity occurring (Hitchcock et al. 2019). Although only the foundation footprint is preserved, it enjoys many parallels in both secular and religious contexts throughout the Mediterranean in Philistia as at Tell Qasile (Mazar 1980; 2000) and Nahal Patish (Nashon and Ziffer 2009), Cyprus and the Aegean in the form of double temples (e.g., Negbi 1988; Gilmour 1993), the Aegean islands and Mainland, and Crete (Hitchcock and Maeir 2017). Among the foundations of the 12th century BCE structure in Area C, Hitchcock selected three of the monumental blocks that sit on top of the foundations for more detailed study using a system devised for cataloguing pre-classical architecture (Hitchcock 2003). Some of the blocks are

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3 This lower, earlier wall is W20A70C03.
large and squared, whereas Block 2 conforms more to the trapezoidal arrangement discussed
above with regard to Area A and measures L 0.58 x W 0.8 x H 0.3 m (Fig. 4). Tool marks are
evident on it and the surface is flattened on its top, front, and west side, probably to create a
levelling course and carry the upper wall. Another notable feature of this block is the oblong
cutting on the top. This cutting may have been a pry- or wedge hole (Oleson 2010: 123), a
feature common in classical architecture, but rare in prehistoric architecture. The purpose of pry
holes was to help manoeuvre a higher block into place.4

Further west in south-eastern Sicily, the site of Pantalica is situated on a hill in the Hyblean
mountains girded and guarded by the Anapo (and Calcinaro) Rivers (Tusa 1987). The
surrounding hillsides include extensive necropoleis of over three thousand rock cut tombs in use
from the Late Bronze Age onwards (Leighton 2019) (Fig. 5). Of relevance to this contribution,
however, is an intriguing 12th century BCE or Late Sicilian Bronze Age monumental building,
the “Anaktoron” (Fig. 6). Initially excavated by Orsi in the late 19th century CE (Orsi 1899),
the Anaktoron has been recently restudied by the University of Catania. This summary is based
on Militello (2017; 2018) and Tomasello (1992; 2004; 2019). The Anaktoron is characterized by
a precise grid (Tomasello 1992: fig. 21; Militello 2017: fig. 5) laid out as a “megaron” style of
plan (e.g., Hitchcock 2010) consisting of ten rooms with precisely squared corners. The walls
used large hammer dressed blocks throughout, sometimes in double rows, which are preserved to
a height of two courses in the south. Its maximum dimensions are 37.40 north south x 14.64 east
west meters, quite large for this era.

4 The pry hole measures: L 16 x W 6 x Depth 5cm. This large block has both Iron I and Iron II ceramics associated
with it, making the date uncertain (Gur-Arieh and Maeir 2020: esp. 184). It’s also possible that the stone was re
used. A similar parallel can be found in the tower at Maan-Palaeokastro on Cyprus, one of two ashlar buildings on
the site built of re-used stone (e.g. Karaghorighs and Demas (1988). Other example of early pry holes have been
detected on Cyprus at Hala Sultan Tekke and at Kouklia-Palaepaphos (Hitchcock 2020b: 231-2; 239-42).
Pantalica’s circulation pattern was reconstructed by Militello (2017: fig. 4; 2018, fig. 5) based on his analysis of the placement of monolithic stone blocks for thresholds and jambs (Fig. 7). It shows one notable Mycenaean characteristic, in the form of axially or centrally placed doorways in many of the rooms. Its circulation patterns referred to above and in Fig. 6 seem otherwise distinct, emphasizing interaction between rooms or between pairs of rooms and the exterior of the building rather than with the interior spaces, possibly indicating local needs and uses associated with communal activity (Borgna 2012: 145). The uniqueness of its circulation pattern combined with foreign references or styles of its masonry technique and plan indicate an entanglement of the local and the foreign, while superficially emulating or appropriating a foreign architectural tradition. The interior spaces indicate little potential to interact with each other. The thickness of the walls and the narrowness of room B suggesting a staircase that could serve as a pantry on the ground floor, a typical function for this type of space, and indicate the building had an upper floor. It can be assumed that the upper floor would have had a very different circulation pattern with rooms interacting with each other, rather than with the exterior. The strict formal layout of the building, enormous worked stone blocks, and trapezoidal cutting technique set out in double rows of stones to create an ashlar effect as discussed above (Fig. 8) represents an architectural break with the past in Late Bronze Age Sicily, and as yet, there are no known comparanda for it on Sicily. Instead, it is quite possible that its architect and builders could have come from abroad, or that they were familiar with foreign architectural traditions (e.g. Hitchcock 2008). Although the masonry technique appears homogeneous based on cursory observation, careful study of the structure reveals several techniques and several stages of construction. Citing a personal communication of a study in experimental archaeology (Bessac), Devolder (2017) has argued that the motor skills required for stone working had to be developed
around the age of fourteen. Similar arguments have been put forth regarding the development of motor skills for textile production (Tzachili 1997: 272-80; Cutler 2016) and for the wielding of weapons (Skogstrand 2017). At the very least, it may be proposed that the builders at Pantalica took inspiration from or were influenced by monumental constructions further east including mainland Greece (Tomasello 2004), Cyprus, and Philistia as discussed by Hitchcock and Maeir (2017).

Regrettably, the early artefactual remains from the “Anaktoron” are minimal given Medieval era rebuilding over the structure (Orsi 1899). However decorated pottery including Pantalica style high pedestalled vases and burnt animal bones in Hall A and spreading into adjoining rooms suggest feasting activities (Borgna 2012) and are in character with roughly contemporary sites in neighboring regions such as Building C-D at Sissi and Quartier Nu at Malia on Crete (Hitchcock and Maeir 2017 with further references) and Tell es-Safi/Gath (Hitchcock et al. 2015).

The siting of the “Anaktoron” is strategic, giving a panoramic view of the surrounding region, which conforms to or recalls the siting of Mycenaean acropoleis as argued by Bernabò Brea (1990). Furthermore, there was a monumental fortification and retaining wall, possibly with a tower (Fig. 9), most evident on the south to discourage a hostile approach. The idea of cutting off an approach by outsiders in such a way suggests a defensive strategy also similar to that of Maa-Palaeokastro (Karageorghis and Demas 1988), a promontory in Cyprus that Hitchcock and Maeir (2016) have suggested was a pirate settlement based on its mixed material culture and on its strategic location. At Pantalica, the architectural features, their monumentality, and their care in construction suggest the wealth, knowledge, and authority to harness resources such as skilled stoncutters and builders. It can also be noted that Aegean inspired ceramics are plentiful from
the Pantalica cemetery and a notched cattle scapula (Fig. 13) with links to scapulamancy known from Cyprus (Webb 1985) and Philistia (Zukerman et al. 2007) was found in excavations in Syracuse.

In Sardinia, during the 12th century BCE, new types of cult buildings such as holy wells and rectangular temples became widely spread across the island, probably due to social changes that happened during the long dominant Nuragic civilization. Nuraghe are primarily unique to Sardinia and are characterized by monumental buildings that took the form of a truncated-conical tower built of dry stone-wall masonry using blocks of various sizes, some quite enormous. Inside the nuraghe there are overlapping rooms covered by a false dome or tholos, accessed by a corbel arched doorway. Nuraghe are accessed by a doorway on the ground level via a corridor, giving access to stairs to upper floors, and they were fortified with additional subsidiary domed structures. The doorways and the domes of nuraghe were constructed by means of the corbelling technique as noted above. This technique was also found in later Mycenaean architecture: in tholos tombs, bridge construction, gate construction, and in the famous galleries at Tiryns. The oblong outer dome provided support for an inner, narrower conical structure that wasn’t subject to collapse as the wider and rounder Mycenaean tholos tombs were. It is possible that Mycenaean builders were influenced by Sardinian construction techniques of stone working and use of the corbelling technique, however the usage of this technique and the style of architecture rendered was distinct.

Nuraghe are widely diffused throughout Sardinia, where they possibly served as checkpoints for interior routes that were constituted by river valleys, and they controlled access to

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5 An exception is found in the nearby Balearic islands and Iberia (Holt 2014 on the architecture), which may have been involved further afield in the tin trade with Cornwall (See Berger et al. 2019).
natural resources such as metals and arable land. Their monumentality was realized through a long-lived tradition in the use of large blocks often also carefully worked. Thus, the Nuragic tradition was distinguished by their specific construction practices and unique plans in the Mediterranean architecture of the Bronze Age and in the Iron Age. Although we tend to regard the 12th century BCE as the Iron Age or transition in the central and eastern Mediterranean, this era is still regarded as the Late or Final Bronze Age in Sardinia.

While past scholars have tried to link this phenomenon of architectural change to climate change that gave rise to drought conditions at this time, (between 1550 and 550 BCE) this situation remains to be verified for Nuragic Sardinia. Depalmas (2014) has suggested that the connection between water as a primary good and a decrease in water reserves served as the basis for the later construction of holy wells and water temples.

The social changes that occurred during the Late Bronze Age sometimes also lead to the transformation of earlier Sardinian nuraghe into places of cult. The monumentalization of a spring source was undertaken inside the Nuraghe Nurdole (Orani, NU) during the Final Bronze Age and exemplifies this phenomenon. Inside the Nuraghe Nurdole, the water seems to have a central role as a ritual element. Drains were installed in order to move the water from the spring to a tank (Salis 2015). Around the tank, numerous objects including pottery, faïence amulets, and bronze artifacts were left as ritual offerings. Stylistic changes in the “bronzetti” (Gonzalez 2012), small bronze figurines bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Cypriot “Ingot” god and to representations of the Sea Peoples in terms of their pose and panoply, demonstrate that Nurdole probably went on to be used as a cult building over the following centuries. The same continuity

6 The similarity takes the form of horned helmets, though the horns are placed in the front of the helmet on “bronzetti,” and carrying a shield and a spear. It should be noted that the “greaves” on the Ingot god represent a repair and ingot represents a later addition (e.g., Pappasavvas 2011a; 2011b).
about cult offerings of the Nuraghe building appears in Su Mulinu site (Villanovafranca). A similar phenomenon, termed “ruin cult” by Prent (2003; 2004), is well known from Crete where offerings were left next to Minoan ruins in order to promote new structures of authority following the 12th century BCE collapse in much of the Aegean.

Holy wells, temples and sanctuaries were typical places where ritual symbolism was shared by local communities. One of them, the holy well of Cuccuru is Arrius (Cabras) seems to show an early use. It had been built immediately after the Recent Bronze Age when the spring vein was possibly used for sacred purposes (Sebis 1987; Salis 2017). The sites of holy wells provided a context for social gatherings in the form of communal experience for social networking that led to a wide distribution of holy wells, sanctuaries, and temples. Sanctuaries were characterized by a variety of cult buildings. Each holy well or temple usually had a surrounding temenos. Megaron style structures composed of a round hall or rectangular hall and rectangular porch with axially placed doorways and constructed of finely worked masonry also appear at this time. Examples include Santa Vittoria-Serri with a circular hall, and with rectangular halls at Domu de Orgia surrounded by an ovoid temenos (Fig. 10) and Bitti, at Su Romanzesu (Fig. 11). The mental templates for such structures in the Final Bronze Age represent a new trend with links to “megaron” style structures (Fig. 12; e.g. Hitchcock 2010) found in Sicily, Cyprus, Greece, Crete, and Philistia, while the masonry tradition likely derives locally based on the long history of stone working in Nuragic culture. Despite occasional references to the nuraghe, the break with the earlier tradition is startling. Even if it is difficult to reconstruct the actions of Nuragic people, the sanctuary of Gremanu (Fonni) might

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7 Zertal’s (2011) claim that el Ahwat’s architecture has connections to Sardinian (and the Shardanu) Nuraghe and successive Sardinian architectural forms seems strained and has been critiqued by Finkelstein and Piasezky (2007).
have had a significant circulation pattern. Nuragic people were easily led to undertake a route, from south to north, inside the sanctuary. Several ritual steps may be performed in the route across the inner temenos, the “C” temple and the “circular temple” before arriving at the temple “in antis”. The sanctuary and the holy source are located in neighboring places.

In conclusion, while we don’t know the exact nature of the performative activities undertaken by the local populations in the early social gathering areas at all of the sites presented, it helps to set the stage for future research. Although the early Iron Age structure in Area A at Tell es-Safi/Gath was not completely excavated, it demonstrates that monumental architecture was more widespread at early Philistine Gath than originally thought and that it sits squarely within a wider tradition being established at this time. This evidence increases the chance that the monumental blocks found in Area C (Siege Tower) and other parts of the site may have been formed at an earlier period than originally thought. Maeir (2020) has suggested that legends grew around this monumentality that might be associated with the Philistines as a race of giants, analogous to the way classical Greeks associated Mycenaean masonry with the Cyclops. Looking westward, we can see populations, possibly shaken by changes, but re-asserting their authority as part of a series of resilient new and continuing networks.

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1 Map Approximating Piracy and Trade Routes in the Mediterranean in the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age (after Galvin 1999 and Criaard 1998).
Fig. 2 The 9th cent. BCE Wall 18A70C01 above the 12th cent. BCE Wall 20A70C03,
Looking East. To the south, the fill between 01 and 03 is clearly visible (photo Hitchcock)
Fig. 3a Square 70C, West Section, with chalk line demarcating boundary between the 9th and 12th centuries BCE (photo Hitchcock) Fig. 3b Wall 20A70C03, looking south (photo Hitchcock)
Fig. 3c Wall 20A70C03, Drawing, Scale 1:20, North at Bottom (Drawing M. Harris-Schober) Fig. 4 Tell es-Safi/Gath, Area C, Siege Tower/Cult Building Foundations, Wall 70024, Block “2” Hammer Dressed Block with “Pry hole,” Scale 1:10 (Drawing L. Hitchcock and M. Harris-Schober)
Fig. 5 Pantalica, Sicily, Hillside Necropolis, Late Bronze through Christian Periods (Photo L.
Hitchcock)
Fig. 6 Pantalica, Sicily, Anaktoron, Plan showing reconstructed circulation patterns, 12th century BCE (P. Militello)
Fig. 7 Pantalica, Sicily, Anaktoron, View of squared corners of building, indicated by large monolithic blocks, 12th century BCE (Photo L. Hitchcock)
Fig. 8 Pantalica, Sicily, Anaktoron, View of wall showing double row of worked trapezoidally cut stones, 12th century BCE (Photo L. Hitchcock)
Fig. 9 Pantalica, Sicily,Fortification for Anaktoron, 12th century BCE (Photo L. Hitchcock)
Fig. 10: Esterzili, Sa Domu de Orgia, Sardinia, Rectilinear “megaron” Style of Building, Final Bronze Age (Photo M.A. Fadda 2015).
Fig. 11: Bitti, Su Romanzesu, Sardinia, Rectilinear “megaron” Style of Building, Final Bronze Age (Photo M. A. Fadda 2015)
Fig. 12: Sardinia, Plans of Various Rectilinear Buildings of the Final Bronze Age (Drawing by L. Foddai, in Moravetti 2015).
Fig. 13 Syracuse Museum, Cattle Scapula, Piazza Duomo Excavations (Photo L. Hitchcock)

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Title:
All in All, It’s Just Another Stone in the Wall: From Safi to Sicily, 12th century Monumental Architecture in the Mediterranean

Date:
2021-12-09

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/268240