

Philistine Cult Stands: Ashdod Musicians

Once occupied by the Anakim (Josh 11:22), Ashdod was taken over by the Philistines (Josh 13:3) and later became the religious center for the Philistine god Dagon (1 Sam 5:1-7). Philistia, the land comprised of the Philistine Pentapolis, encompassed the cities: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath and Gaza.

Some 3,000 years later, while excavating Tell Mor in Ashdod during the 1960s, Israeli archaeologist Moshe Dothan recovered a Philistine cult stand featuring five musicians.

Specializing in Maritime Civilizations, Dothan found Ashdod to have 22 layers of debris which indicated that it was occupied continuously from the 17th century B.C. through the 15th century A.D.

Stands holding libations or incense for religious offerings were called cult stands and were fairly common in the Near East. Made of stone, bronze or clay, most cult stands made by pagan cultures during the Conquest and the establishment of the united Kingdom of Israel were of clay.

The Ashdod cult stand with five musicians was dated to the 10th century and reflected Philistine art and culture. The construction and decoration were typical of Philistine ceramics.

The cylindrical clay stand stood 34.7 cm (13.7 in) high, and its base was 14.2 cm (5.6 in) wide.



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Displayed through four windows cut around the base, four musicians are playing instruments: one plays a frame drum, one plays a stringed instrument (i.e. lyre), one plays a two piped instrument (i.e. a double flute) and one plays a cymbal.

The fifth player, largest of them all, plays a double flute and appears to be protruding out of his window; he may represent the leader of the group.

Inscribed above the musicians are 3 rectangles each containing a crudely inscribed animal, which scholars believe may represent a procession of animals going to sacrifice.

With its portrayal of five musicians, the Philistine cult stand is significant for providing a better understanding of the biblical text regarding instruments. Of particular note is that the Ashdod 5-musician cult stand dating corresponds to the approximate time when the Bible specifically refers to musician – prophets in the vicinity of Philistines:

Afterward you will come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is; and it shall be as soon as you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine (**frame drum**), flute (**double flute**), and a lyre before them, and they will be prophesying. (1 Sam 10:5)

References:

1. Fant CE and Reddish MG, *Lost Treasures of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing (2008).
2. Hestrin R, *The Philistines and the Other Sea Peoples*, Jerusalem: The Israel Museum (1970).
3. From the website: Society of Old Testament Study (SOTS) project, Jerusalem Fall of a City – Rise of a Vision: “Musicians Cult Stand from Ashdod” (<http://jerusalem.nottingham.ac.uk/items/show/145>).