

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF ERETZ-ISRAEL
IN THE PERSIAN PERIOD, 531-332 B. C. E.

by

Dr. Ephraim Stern*

"The Persian Period in Eretz-Israel is one of the most obscure in the history of this country, and its origins are lost in antiquity. While the history of the monarchies in Eretz-Israel is well documented by Biblical literature, the Persian Period is represented by only a few references which do not provide a picture of any clarity. Indeed, these references relate only to a period ending with the middle of the fifth century B. C. E. This same paucity of material holds true for the Apocrypha, and *Geniza* and Greek literature. Research into the material culture of this period is therefore all the more useful in that it can help to round out the incomplete picture provided by literary sources."

The above quote is taken from Dr. Stern's foreword to his book. Dr. Ephraim Stern of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has devoted himself to the study of this obscure period, and presents his conclusions to the public in this volume. This public is of necessity a limited group of scholars, despite the elaborate presentation and numerous illustrations (photographs, sketches, maps, etc.) to be found in the book. No ordinary mortal could possibly want to, or more accurately, be capable of making his way through the plethora of details which make up the general picture. (We hasten to add that the book is attractively presented according to topics – architecture, burial, pottery, metalware, ceremonial objects, seals, weights, etc.). This statement is not intended as derogatory, but rather as descriptive of the book. This is quite simply a scientific work written by a scholar for scholars, resembling in this fashion Dr. Ruth Amiran's *Ancient Pottery of the Holy Land from its beginnings in the Neolithic Period to the end of the Iron Age*, 1973, or Dr. Trude Dothan's *The Philistines and their Material Culture*, 1967. These two works were also published by Mosad Bialik and The Israel Exploration Society in Jerusalem; together, the three works may be regarded as forming a series of research monographs.

* Original Hebrew title: התרבות החומרית של ארץ-ישראל בתקופה הפרסית Mosad Bialik and the Israel Exploration Society, Jerusalem, 1973, 286 pages. This review, by Avinoam Haimi, appeared originally in Hebrew in *HaAretz*, June 14, 1974. Haimi died in January of 1976.

Despite its scientific character, the book does contain a summary which can be appreciated by the less scholarly reader (pp. 225 - 251 of the 286 pages of the book – the pages after the summary contain notes and appendices). “The Character of the Material Culture of Eretz-Israel in the Persian Period,” the first section of this summary sums up the scientific chapters of the book, a short survey of the forms of building, burial, pottery and metal vessels, jewellery, weapons, figurines, etc., without, however, going into the details of the finds upon which the author’s conclusions are based (these details are set forth in the “scientific” chapters of the book). The second section of the summary, “The Geographic-Historical Background of Eretz-Israel in the Persian Period,” is loosely connected with the first chapter of the book proper, “Excavations and Surveys.” This chapter deals mainly with the administrative boundaries of Eretz-Israel and with the provinces and sub-districts of Eretz-Israel during the Persian Period. Finally, the third section of the summary, “A History of Settlement,” does not have a counterpart in the archaeological section of the book, but is competently rounded out by one of the appendices, “Significant Events in the Persian Period.”

Apart from the summary here described, the laymen can also benefit by reading the first section of the foreword, “The Literary and Epigraphic Evidence.” At first glance the author’s conclusion that “The sum total of literary and epigraphic sources do not present much information on Eretz-Israel and the general picture that can be derived therefrom is very sparse” seems rather surprising in the light of the lengthy list of sources quoted. Anyone familiar with this topic is, however, aware that this period, relatively late in the history of Eretz-Israel, is less known than more ancient periods.

The reader who has not the courage to attempt even the summary in this book would do well to read Stern’s article “Eretz-Israel in the Persian Period” in *Qadmoniot*, the quarterly journal of the Israel Exploration Society (issue 8, 1969). Both the article and the book (pp. 233 - 234) present Stern’s basic conclusions:

a) Persian influence in Eretz-Israel is felt mostly in the sphere of government, and very little in the cultural sphere;

b) Eretz-Israel was divided into two regions from the very beginning of the Persian Period: the hilly region of Judea and Transjordan (less so Samaria), and Galilee and the sea-coast. The culture of the hilly region is basically “oriental,” deriving from the local culture which carried on the Israelite culture, and from oriental influences such as the Assyrian, the Babylonian and the Egyptian. The coastal culture, on the other hand, is basically “occidental,” and oriental-Greek, Cypriote, and Athenian elements can be distinguished.

As for the Persians, “The main influence of their prolonged rule . . . in Eretz-Israel is felt in areas connected with their foreign mode of rule –

in government, military organization, funds and taxation, and that but indirectly." Stern cites the calendar according to reigns of the Persian kings and of terms of Persian administrators on the spot. He also notes a certain "flag" (military unit) and the numerous military forts and granaries which give evidence of the Persian military system. Dr. Stern writes of the weapons and chariot fittings found in tombs of the period; many of these finds are extremely similar to the Scythian-Iranian type found in the guard-rooms at Persepolis.

Dr. Stern states that Persian influence is more noticeable in taxation and financial affairs, "for in distinction to the Persian administration's liberal attitude vis-à-vis worship and governing of conquered peoples, this administration was rather strict in matters of economics and taxation." Relevant finds include seal-impressions on the handles of pottery vessels from Judaea, used by the authorities as standard measures for payment of taxes in kind; the designs on the seals derive from official Achaemenid motifs. These seals prove that administration and finance in Judaea were initially handled by officials of the Achaemenid Empire.

Realia mirroring direct influence of Persian administrative arrangements can also show historical developments. For example, "At times the Achaemenid seals were replaced by seals bearing the name of the province 'Yahud' in Aramaic script. This fact seems to indicate that at the end of the fifth century, possibly in the days of Nehemiah or shortly thereafter, a reform in the administration of the provinces took place. Alt has already put forth a hypothesis that for all practical purposes Nehemiah freed Judaea from subordination to Samaria and turned it into an independent province."

Additional historical material falling into the category of "Persian" finds are the papyri with seal impressions from the Wadi Daliya cave north of Jericho. It is assumed that inhabitants of Samaria – non-Jewish Samaritans – fled to this cave after rebelling against the commissioner of Alexander the Great. Only a small part of this material has been published thus far, but interim reports show that some forty papyrus fragments, 130 seal impressions, two gold seal-rings, jewellery, pottery vessels and coins were found. The documents were written in Samaria. From the Persian calendar dates appearing on them, it can be determined that the earliest papyrus dates from 375 B. C. E., while the latest dates from 335 B. C. E. Perhaps after publication of all the material, we shall be able to speculate on why refugees from the Samaria revolt were prompted to take these documents to the cave with them in their flight (during the days of Bar Kokhba's Revolt, some 470 years later, a Jewess, Babata Bat Shim'on, took her personal papers with her during her flight to the caves).

Why is the direct influence of Persia on the material culture of Eretz-Israel so negligible while its influence is far greater on the remainder of cultures of the Ancient East – Egypt, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Heth, or

even Cyprus or Greece? Dr. Stern does not state his theory on this, but I feel that one of the reasons must be the fact that Eretz-Israel is so far-removed from Persia, the centre of the new cultural influence.

Finally, it must be noted that Dr. Stern deals with a period in the history of Israel which is not only obscure but also a period of transition. Persia was the last of the ancient eastern powers to impose her rule on Eretz-Israel. But, as emerges from the above, the name "The Persian Period" in Eretz-Israel is but a shortened form of "The Period of Persian Rule;" the influence of this rule on the material culture of the region is barely felt.

The significant cultural influences are still those that preceded the days of Cyrus; a new and powerful influence is now added, that of the culture imported, mainly by the Phoenicians, from Cyprus and from the Greek world (it should be recalled that Aegean influences on Eretz-Israel existed as far back as the Late Bronze Age – in this connection we recommend the exhibition of the Excavations of Athienou in Cyprus mounted by Miriam Tadmor at the Israel Museum with great originality – but these influences were much weaker than those from the south, the east, and the north). In this regard, the "Persian" period but heralds its successor, when after Alexander's conquest the area was laid open to Greek influences which in turn, together with a cultural tradition of thousands of years standing, gave rise to Hellenistic culture.

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