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Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?

By [Lawrence E. Stager](#)[Sidebar: Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites](#)

This is part II of a three-part article. Part I appeared in the last issue (“[When Canaanites and Philistines Ruled Ashkelon](#),” [BAR 17:02](#)). Part III will appear in the next issue (“[Eroticism and Infanticide at Ashkelon](#),” [BAR 17:04](#)).



Ancient Ashkelon, now quietly nestled beside the Mediterranean in the south of Israel, is shaped like a giant 150-acre bowl, with the sea wearing away at much of the western half. The rim and sides of the bowl are formed by the mammoth Middle Bronze Age glacis, or rampart, that once protected the city. Inside the bowl are buried at least 20 ancient cities, dating from about 3500 B.C. to 1500 A.D., a span of 5,000 years.



In the last issue, we examined the Middle Bronze and Iron Age cities—the first, Canaanite and

the second, Philistine.

In 604 B.C., Philistine Ashkelon was destroyed by the neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (neb-uh-kuh-DREZ-uh; also called Nebuchadnezzar [neb-uh-kuhd-NEZ-uh]), whose army soon thereafter (in 586 B.C.) destroyed Jerusalem, capital of the kingdom of Judah, together with its Temple. Thus began what is known in Israelite history as the Babylonian Exile. Less widely known is the fact that the Philistines too were exiled to Babylon.

The Babylonians were replaced (in 538 B.C.) by the Persians, who expanded and then ruled the biggest empire the world had known before Alexander the Great—from the eastern Mediterranean to India. A more benign imperial power than the Babylonians—perhaps we may even characterize their hegemony as enlightened—the Persians under Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to their land and even to rebuild their Temple ([Ezra 1:2–4](#), [6:3–5](#)).

No record exists, however, as to what happened to the exiled Philistines. Those who may have remained in Ashkelon after Nebuchadnezzar's conquest apparently lost their ethnic identity. They simply disappear from history.

Culturally, Ashkelon once again became Canaanite—or, more precisely, Phoenician, as the coastal Canaanites are called at this time, having developed a culture of their own, supported by a far-flung commercial empire to the west.

During the Persian period (538–332 B.C.), the great Persian kings ruled the area politically, but they were not cultural imperialists. Even politically, they ruled with a comparatively gentle hand, giving rather wide latitude to local satrapies. In the heart of Phoenicia—the eastern Mediterranean coast, in what today is Lebanon—the Persians found willing allies among the Phoenicians, who provided their Persian overlords with naval power and wealth from the Mediterranean world and beyond.

For their cooperation, the Persians gave Phoenicians from Sidon and Tyre control of the coast as far south as Ashkelon. (Farther south, Gaza remained more a desert port than a Mediterranean seaport.) The Persians assigned governors for the coastal cities, cleverly alternating a Tyrian and a Sidonian governor for each major coastal city down to Ashkelon.

According to a mid-to-late-fourth-century B.C. source,¹ Ashkelon was known as a “city of the Tyrians” and headquarters of a Tyrian governor.

Phoenician culture—and therefore, we may assume, the Phoenicians—dominated Ashkelon by the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. This is evidenced by Phoenician inscriptions (one as early as about 500 B.C.), iconography characteristic of Phoenician religion (especially the sign of the goddess Tanit) and by the Phoenician pottery we excavated.



The Phoenicians brought with them to Ashkelon not only their culture. With their maritime and commercial skills, they also brought a great deal of prosperity to the port. In fact, the whole eastern coast of the Mediterranean prospered during the Persian period under the enterprising Phoenicians. This stands in sharp contrast to the comparatively impoverished province of Judah, or Yehud (ye-HOOD) as it was known in official Aramaic in the Persian period, with Jerusalem as its capital. In abundance of Persian-period remains, the contrast between the two areas is remarkable. Inland, in Yehud, Persian-period strata are very thin if not ephemeral. On the Mediterranean coast, Persian-period occupational debris is quite thick—6 to 10 feet at Ashkelon and at Dor to the north.



Within the huge bowl that is the tell at Ashkelon are two mounds, one in the northern part and one in the southern part of the site. On the north side of the southern mound (Grid 38), known as al-Hadra, nearly 10 feet of Persian-period occupational debris overlay the Philistine strata. The Persian-period sequence begins with monumental ashlar^a buildings that we have only partially excavated. Thereafter, we found at least five more phases^b or subphases of buildings, culminating in a major destruction in about 300 B.C. Rooms in the destroyed buildings were filled with burnt and fallen debris from the superstructure. In the debris were buried basket-handled amphorae (AM-fo-ree)^c and a linen bag filled with Phoenician silver coins of the fourth century B.C.



That the conflagration was widespread is clear from evidence in Grid 57 on the southwestern side of the city. Here we found the same phases and subphases of Persian-period occupation, beginning with a monumental structure built in about 500 B.C., followed by later phases of

architecture, such as street-front workshops, culminating in a massive destruction. Shortly before the destruction of about 300 B.C., the inhabitants of one of the buildings secreted a hoard of silver coins and a silver bracelet. The coins were tetradrachmas (tet-ruh-DRAK-muhs) bearing the portrait of Alexander the Great. Nearby was a laurel-leaf crown of gold with side pieces of gilded bone. Several basket-handled amphorae stored on the second floor of one of the buildings collapsed onto the first floor. The basement was filled with burnt bricks, rubble and pottery of the late fourth century B.C.

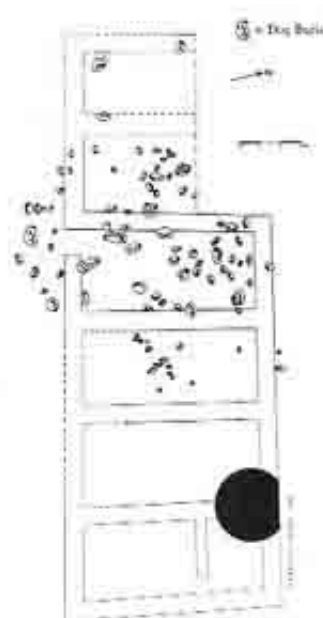


Because of the presence of a hoard of his coins, the citywide destruction must have occurred after Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.) had conquered the Levant (about 332 B.C.). Ashkelon (but not Gaza) was apparently spared the destruction which accompanied Alexander's conquest. But soon thereafter, in about 300 B.C. (although we cannot be certain until all of the data—pottery, coins, etc.—have been analyzed), Ashkelon too was devastated. This tragic episode must have occurred about the time Ptolemy I Soter (c. 367/6–283/2 B.C.) of Egypt was establishing his supremacy over the region, when Ashkelon was no longer under the control of Tyre.

In Grid 57 we also made one of the strangest discoveries of the entire excavation. In the phase following the construction of the monumental building mentioned previously, sandwiched in between that initial phase and the following architectural phase was a brief interlude (Phase 5 in Grid 57) when the floor area was leveled and used as a dog cemetery! We found a dozen dogs carefully buried here.



In nearby Grid 50 we uncovered an impressive building with six almost identical rooms. These rooms seem to be magazines of a large warehouse, about 30 by 60 feet. Each magazine had nearly 250 square feet of interior storage space. On the floors of the magazines, we excavated several Phoenician amphorae; Greek Attic Black-glazed ware; Red-figured as well as Black-figured fine ware, also from Greece; and a scapula (collar-bone) of a camel that was one of the basic raw materials from which fine bone artifacts were manufactured. The imprint of a basket containing red ocher was all that remained of perishable items. Other pigments, such as brown umber from Cyprus, were found stored nearby.



In its original construction, this large warehouse was stepped or terraced down toward the sea; the western half of the building's stone foundations therefore lay at a lower level than the eastern half. In the next phase (Phase 7 in Grid 50, which corresponds to Phase 5 in Grid 57), this western area was leveled up with a series of rubbish-laden fills. But before the leveled area was next used as a warehouse (sometime in the last half of the fifth century B.C.), the deeper fills above the western half of the warehouse were put to a far different use: it was part of a huge dog cemetery that extended all the way to the 12 dog burials we had found in Grid 57. Moreover, the western limits of the dog cemetery could not be ascertained because that part had eroded into the sea.

Till now, we have found more than 700 partial or complete dog carcasses from the fifth century B.C., most of them buried in the western half of Grid 50. Because only the eastern limits of this dog cemetery have been established, we can speculate that it was originally much larger, with dog burials probably numbering in the thousands. This is by far the largest animal cemetery of any kind known in the ancient world.



Ashkelon's dog cemetery was of extremely short duration, perhaps lasting no more than 50 years. Thereafter the area was returned to its previous mercantile use (though we have indications that dogs still received special burials elsewhere later in the Persian period). Nevertheless, in that short period, as many as three burials were found superimposed in some

places, one dug into the other. This suggests that there were no burial markers over the graves. Each dog carcass was carefully and individually placed in a shallow pit dug into the fill of what had previously been a warehouse. Each dog was deliberately placed on its side, its legs flexed and its tail tucked in around the hindlegs. The carcass was then carefully covered with earth containing a mixture of cultural debris. However, no grave goods can be associated with the dog burials.



When undisturbed by later building activity or scavenging, the dog burials present a remarkably homogeneous picture. Actually, it was quite tedious (some would say boring) excavating them, each of which we had to excavate as carefully as the last.

About 60 to 70 percent of the dogs were puppies; the remainder were subadult and adult dogs. Our staff zooarchaeologists, Dr. Paula Wapnish and Professor Brian Hesse, of the University of Alabama in Birmingham, tell us that the skeletons lack any butchering marks, which indicates that the dogs died of natural causes. This is confirmed, according to them, by the fact that the mortality profile of the Ashkelon dogs is similar to that of urban dog populations today. Thus, it does not appear that these dogs were eaten (as the Persians accused the Phoenician Carthaginians of doing²). Nor does it appear that these dogs were offered as sacrifices, despite the implication in Third Isaiah^d in a passage written shortly before the Ashkelon dog cemetery was established:

“Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; whoever presents a grain offering, like one who offers swine’s blood; whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol.” ([Isaiah 66:3](#); New [RSV](#))

The mature Ashkelon dogs were a little over 20 inches high and weighed a little more than 30 pounds—a dog population of medium height and build. Although no known modern breed correlates exactly with the Ashkelon dogs, Wapnish and Hesse have found a modern counterpart in today’s Bedouin sheepdogs, known as Palestinian pariah dogs. The best ancient representation of dogs similar to the Ashkelon dogs is probably the hound on the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus (late fourth century B.C.) from Sidon, on which Alexander the Great and his client, the king of Sidon, pursue a lion with a hunting hound of about the same size and build as the Ashkelon dogs. Like the dog on the sarcophagus, the Ashkelon hounds could have been used in hunting, to pursue hares, gazelles, wild goats or even lions.



A critical datum: Newborn dogs and puppies were given the same careful mortuary treatment as more mature dogs. This concern for the proper burial of what in some cases were probably dog fetuses reflects an intense relationship between dogs and humans. Yet, because many of these dogs lived only for a short time, if at all, the attachment could not be based on mere companionship.

In classical Greek society, where dogs were greatly appreciated, poets sometimes wrote very moving epitaphs for dogs, to be inscribed on markers over the pet’s grave, as in this example penned by the poet Tymnes in about 300 B.C.

“The stone tells that it [the grave] contains here the white Milesian dog, Eumelos’ faithful guardian. They called him ‘Bull’ while he still lived, but now the silent paths of night possess his voice.”³

But in ancient Greece, as now, special burials were reserved for pets old enough for some kind of human bonding to have occurred. This could not have been the case for the majority of dogs buried at Ashkelon.

The best explanation seems to be that the Ashkelon dogs were revered as sacred animals. As such, they were probably associated with a particular deity and with that god’s sacred precinct, about which the dogs were free to roam.

I hasten to add that we have not yet found a shrine or temple associated with the dog cemetery. But most of the environs of the cemetery have not yet been excavated—and a substantial area to the west has collapsed into the sea.

The area occupied by the dog cemetery is significant. Throughout the preceding and the remainder of the Persian period, this ground was devoted to profit-making enterprises connected with the export-import business. But for a generation or so, this was interrupted by the dog cemetery, apparently devoted to ritual purposes.

Dog burials are extremely rare outside of Ashkelon, although in the same period at neighboring Ashdod, seven dog burials were recorded. Recently, a dog from the Persian period was found buried in a jar at Tell Qasile, in modern Tel Aviv.⁴ Several dogs were also found buried at Gezer, but these are a couple of centuries later, in the Hellenistic period.

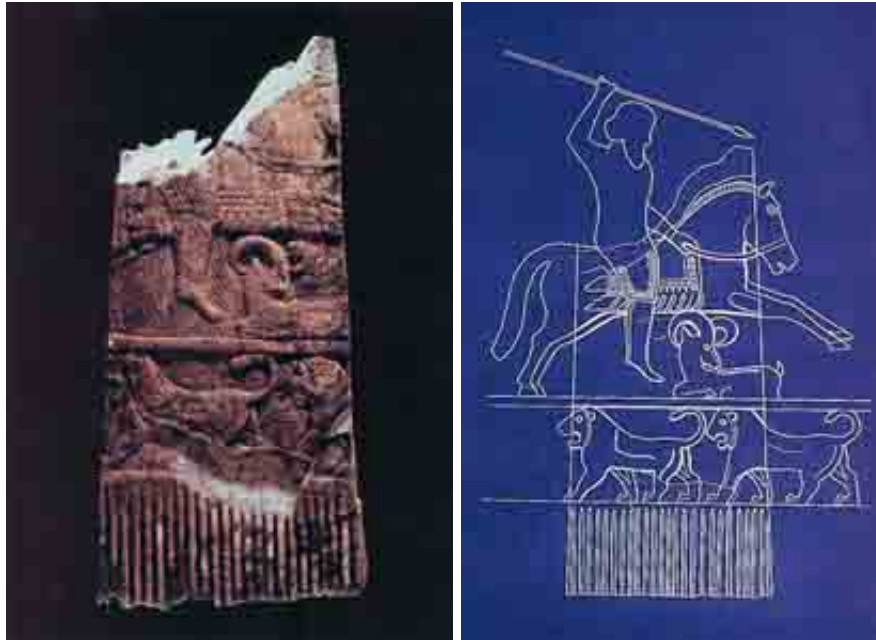
Like many other ports and caravan cities, Ashkelon had a heterogeneous population throughout most of its history, comprised of local citizens and a variety of foreign merchants. In cosmopolitan Ashkelon of the Persian period, we should not be surprised to find Persians, Phoenicians, Philistines, Egyptians, Greeks and Jews. And the artifacts recovered in our excavations provide evidence for the presence of diverse elements in the city’s population from the mid-sixth through the fourth centuries B.C. The culture of any of these could provide clues to understanding the significance of the strange dog cemetery we found in the midst of this mercantile district.



In the cosmology of the Persian Zoroastrians, dogs rank next to humans in both this world and the next. In Zoroastrian death rites, the priest gives an egg, a symbol of immortality, to a dog to eat. He then leads the dog to the home of the dead person, where the dog gazes at the corpse and then eats three pieces of bread from the chest of the corpse. After that, the dead body is washed and shrouded. Then for three days a dog vicariously eats three meals a day for the deceased. Then each day for the next 40 days, the canine vicar is fed three pieces of baked bread and a roasted egg at the house of the deceased.⁵

Although Persian reverence for dogs might have influenced the practice at Ashkelon, a Zoroastrian would not have laid the corpse of a human or a dog directly in the ground without a lining of stones or the like to protect the earth from the corpse, which was considered a highly charged pollutant.⁶ That the dogs in the Ashkelon cemetery were placed directly into the ground in unlined pits mitigates against the Zoroastrian association.

Moreover, the traces of Persian material culture in the West are minimal. At Ashkelon a beautiful ivory comb, with hunting scenes and rows of lions, recalls Persian Achaemenid art; a lead weight encased in a truncated shaft of decorated bone seems to conform to the Persian standard.⁷ But other than that, the immediate, direct impact of Persians on the material culture of the coast seems negligible.



What about the Egyptians? We know that the Egyptians were nearby and exported basketfuls of trinkets and amulets to Ashkelon. The Egyptians are well known for their reverence, even worship, of animals: they installed them in temples and devoted special precincts to their burials, although most were mummified for careers in the afterlife. Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century B.C., mentions the dog among several animals venerated by Egyptians:

“For each kind of animal [including dogs] that is accorded this worship there has been consecrated a portion of land which returns a revenue sufficient for their care and sustenance...

“The sacred animals are kept in ‘sacred enclosures’ and are cared for by many men of distinction who offer them the most expensive fare... When one of these animals dies, they wrap it in fine linen and then, wailing and beating their breasts, carry it off to be embalmed..., [and then] they lay it away in a consecrated

tomb.”⁸



None of the buried dogs at Ashkelon, however, showed any signs of mummification.

Thus, although the Greeks, Egyptians and Persians could all be described as “canidophiles” (dog-lovers), I doubt that any one of these relatively small ethnic groups residing in Ashkelon could have accounted for the hundreds (if not thousands) of dogs buried here in the fifth century B.C. And neither the Greeks nor the Egyptians would have had the authority to convert prime real estate into a sacred precinct for dog burials.





The only people with sufficient authority and a large enough population to account for so many dog burials in such a short time were the Phoenicians. Their material culture dominated Ashkelon throughout the Persian period. This is shown by the ubiquity of their religious symbols, such as the “sign of Tanit,” as well as their pottery and inscriptions. Although other ethnic groups, such as the Egyptians or the Persians, might have had an influence on Phoenician attitudes and ritual concerning dogs, it was the Phoenicians, I believe, who were responsible for the dog burials at Ashkelon and who considered the dog a sacred animal. The evidence for this inference—derived mainly from the archaeological remains—is, however, not conclusive. I describe it in some detail in the sidebar [“Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites.”](#)





Presumably the dog became associated with healing because of the curative powers evident from licking its own wounds or sores. One neo-Assyrian text in cuneiform suggests that even touching the sacred dog was sufficient to heal: “If a man goes to the temple of his god, and if he touches... (?), he is clean (again?); likewise if he touches the dog of Gula [the goddess of healing], he is clean (again?).”⁹

Dogs were involved in healing cults in many different cultures in antiquity; their association with temples and healing deities was rather widespread in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, whether it be Gula in Mesopotamia, Asklepios in Greece, Eshmun in Phoenicia, Mukol or Resheph-Mukol in Phoenician Cyprus, or, earlier still, at Late Bronze Age Beth-Shean. In Egypt sacred dogs participated in rituals where, according to Diodorus, the Egyptians “make vows to certain gods on behalf of their children who have been delivered from an illness, in which case they shave off their hair and weigh it against silver or gold, and then give the money to the attendants of the animals mentioned [including dogs].”¹⁰ According to the Kition plaque, discussed in the sidebar [“Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites.”](#) it was the attendants who were paid for the services involving healing rites performed by the sacred “dogs and puppies” in the Phoenician temple at Kition.

This is also the context in which we should understand the Deuteronomist’s condemnation of those who bring the “wages of a dog into the house of Yahweh in payment for any vow” ([Deuteronomy 23:18](#)). There were probably healing cults involving sacred dogs operating in the vicinity of the Jerusalem Temple. It is in such a cultic context that I would—at least tentatively—understand the hundreds of puppy and dog burials at Ashkelon. We do not know the name of the deity with whom these sacred dogs were associated (Resheph-Mukol or Eshmun [= Asklepios]?—see the sidebar, [“Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites.”](#)) nor do we yet have the temple to which the dogs might have belonged. Until the temple or other cultic architecture is found, our hypothesis must be regarded as unconfirmed.

If anyone has a better explanation for the immense dog cemetery at Ashkelon, I would like to hear it.

Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites

By [Lawrence E. Stager](#)

[Sidebar to: Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?](#)



In the ancient Near East, dogs are often associated with particular deities and the powers they wield. We cannot yet be sure with which deity the dogs in the cemetery at Ashkelon were associated. There are several possibilities, in several cultural guises, often interrelated as one deity merges into another.

But in the end, a common theme emerges—deities with healing powers are often associated with dogs.

According to a Phoenician legend, the leading deity of the city of Tyre, Herakles-Melkart, was credited with the discovery of purple. Actually, however, it was his dog who discovered the product for which the Phoenicians were world-renowned—purple dye, extracted from a gland in a Murex mollusk: Herakles was strolling along the beach with his dog and with a beautiful nymph named Tyrus. His hound discovered a Murex and bit into it. The dye from the snail stained the dog's lips a bright purple, a color the nymph greatly admired. Herakles collected enough mollusks to dye a robe purple and presented this fine gift to the nymph. This discovery was celebrated on coins from Tyre, depicting a dog sniffing a Murex snail.¹¹

More pertinent, however, is a small (about 6 by 4 inches) mid-fifth-century B.C. limestone plaque inscribed on both sides in Phoenician; it was found in 1869 at the Phoenician port city of Kition on Cyprus.¹²



The Kition plaque lists personnel associated in some way with the temples of the goddess of fertility, Astarte, and a more obscure male deity, Mukol (vocalized variously as Mokal, Mukal or even Mikal). Mukol appears as part of a compound god name, Resheph-Mukol (*rsû pmkl*) in several fourth-century B.C. inscriptions at Idalion, Cyprus, where his cult flourished.¹³ In a

trilingual inscription from there,¹⁴ Resheph-Mukol is equated in Greek with Apollo-Amuklos.

Resheph is known from Ugaritic and Aramaic inscriptions as the lord of the underworld (= Mesopotamian Nergal), lord of plague, pestilence and disease—and conversely the god of healing. William F. Albright suggested that the Phoenician god of healing par excellence, Eshmun (whose Greek equivalent was Asklepios), had a Canaanite precursor, Sulman (literally, “One of welfare”). The Canaanite underworld figure named *Rasûap-Sûlman*, then, represented both polarities, namely sickness and health.¹⁵

Resheph-Mukol = Apollo-Amuklos could be the same sort of bipolar deity, embodying what seems to us (but not to them) mutually exclusive, contradictory aspects. At Ugarit, Resheph bore the title “Lord of the Arrow Resheph” (*bʿl hʿzʿl rsûSp*). A millennium later in Cyprus he was still called “Resheph of the Arrow.”¹⁶ The name itself probably means “Burning”/“Fever”/“Plague” according to Frank Moore Cross.

Apollo also has an ambivalent nature: besides being a god of healing, father of Asklepios and bearing the epithet Physician (*Iatros*), Apollo is also the god of plague. In the *Iliad* 1.43–52 an angry Apollo marches down from Mt. Olympus, carrying his silver bow, the arrows rattling in his quiver. He sends a plague upon the Achaean army by shooting a “tearing arrow” into them. “The corpse fires burned everywhere and did not stop burning.” For nine days Apollo bombarded them with arrows. As William J. Fulco and Walter Burkert so astutely pointed out, the “arrows of Apollo,” like those of Resheph (and we might add, those of Yahweh), signify pestilence.¹⁷ Conversely, Apollo’s image was capable of warding off plague. It was Canaanite Resheph-Mukal who bequeathed many attributes to the archer-god Apollo, god of healing, god of plague.

There may be a much earlier evidence of the bipolar Resheph-Mukol, or Mukal, in Late Bronze Age Beth-Shean. An Egyptian stela found there in a temple from stratum IX depicts a bearded deity who sits enthroned before two worshippers.¹⁸ The deity wears a high conical cap with two streamers down the back and two small horns protruding from the front—horns very much like those worn by Resheph, whose animal emblems included the gazelle. However, the seated deity is identified by the hieroglyphic inscription as “Mukal, the great god, lord of Beth-Shean.” From the same temple of Mukal comes one of the most superb pieces of Canaanite art, a beautifully carved basalt relief (probably an orthostat), 3 feet high, with the following scene: In the upper register a dog and a lion stand on their hindlegs engaged in battle. In the lower one, the dog is prevailing over the lion as he bites the haunches of the lion. It is tempting to link the victorious dog with the god Mukal.

It seems clear that the Greek Apollo inherited his darker side as god of pestilence as well as his brighter side as god of healing from Canaanite Resheph. It was this Apollo of Cypro-Phoenician lineage who bequeathed his name to the Roman city Apollonia, between Caesarea and Jaffa, which earlier had been named for Resheph, as the modern Arabic placename Arsuf still attests. Likewise, the worship of Apollo in Hellenistic Ashkelon probably bore more resemblance to that of Resheph-Mukol in Phoenician Cyprus than to the sun worship and youth cult of Apollo in Greece. One tradition has it that Herod’s grandfather served as hierodule (a temple servant) in the temple of Apollo at Ashkelon. The sacred dogs of Ashkelon, like the dogs and puppies at Kition, just might have been part of a healing cult in the tradition of Apollo-Resheph-Mukol.^e

By classical times in Greece, Asklepios, the son of Apollo (= Resheph), had become more popular among the Greeks than even his father Apollo also a healing deity. The most famous shrine of Asklepios’ healing cult was at Epidaurus, where patients would come to spend the night in the dormitory (*abaton*) in the hope that Asklepios would appear to them in a dream vision and reveal a cure for the sleeper’s disease or illness. Or the clients might be visited during the night by surrogates of the god—sacred dogs and snakes whose “tongues” were believed to have a therapeutic effect on the clients. Professor Howard Clark Kee of Boston University provides this memorable image of the experience: “It is easy to imagine the vigil of the suppliants, lying in the total darkness of the *abaton*, listening for the padding feet of the priests or the sacred dogs, or the nearly noiseless slithering of the sacred snakes.”¹⁹

Among the temple personnel mentioned on the Kition plaque are builders, marshals, singers, servants, sacrificers, bakers, barbers, shepherds (who may have raised flocks for temple sacrifices), maidens (*ʿlmt*, sometimes rendered “temple prostitutes”) and—relevant to our topic—dogs (*klbm*). In short, here we find dogs associated with a Phoenician temple, or temples, of Astarte and Mukol.

All of the personnel mentioned in the Kition plaque, including dogs, receive particular payments for services rendered.

The word “dogs” appears in the same line of this inscription with a much-disputed term, *grm*.

According to one scholar, A. Van den Branden, the dogs were actually humans who served as male prostitutes, or sodomites, in the temple rituals. This is the service for which they were paid. The *grm*, according to Van den Branden, were “lambs” or “adolescent prostitutes” in the cult. Later he modified his interpretation and suggested that these two groups of temple prostitutes received their names—“dogs” and “lambs”—from the animal masks and costumes they wore.²⁰ The masked humans symbolized an earlier era when bestiality, involving real dogs and lambs, was performed in the cult.

Van den Branden based his (mis)understanding of the text on the Kition plaque largely on a common but equally questionable interpretation of a Biblical text, [Deuteronomy 23:18](#):

“You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your god in payment for any vow; for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.”

Van den Branden’s argument is based in large part on this passage from Deuteronomy, in which most Biblical commentators contend that “wages of a dog” is parallel to “hire of a harlot”; a harlot (*zonah*) being a female prostitute, dog (*kib*) must, therefore, be a male prostitute.

I do not see the necessity, however, of assuming that “dog” in this passage is the male counterpart of a female prostitute. It is not sodomy or pederasty that is the abomination in the context of this passage; rather it is the “bad” money accruing from the services of a harlot or a dog. To use that kind of money to pay for a vow in the Jerusalem Temple would be an abomination to the Israelite deity Yahweh.

Professor Brian Peckham of the University of Toronto, an expert on the Phoenicians, has written a superb analysis of the Kition plaque in which he too discards connotations of sodomy and pederasty that some scholars have imputed to the terms *kibm* (dogs) and *grm* in the Kition plaque. He has also decisively dated the Kition plaque to about 450 B.C., precisely in our period. On the other hand, Peckham agrees with Van den Branden that the dogs (*kibm*) and *grm* were humans masked as animals, who participated in some kind of temple rituals. The people with *kibm* masks were masquerading as dogs; those with *grm* masks, as lions. The latter identification is based on the Hebrew *gr* (plural, *grm*) which means lions or, more precisely, lion cubs, since Hebrew *grm* usually refers to lion whelps in the Bible.”²¹

I prefer, however, to take a very literal interpretation of *kib* (dog; plural *kibm*) in both [Deuteronomy 23:18](#) and in the Kition plaque. In both texts the authors are referring not to humans acting like dogs in cult dramas but to actual dogs that performed services in the sacred precincts of the Phoenicians. Moreover, *grm* (singular *gr*) in the Bible can refer not only to lion whelps but also to the young of any animal, such as the jackal in [Lamentations 4:3](#); on this basis the *grm* in the Kition plaque refers to the antecedent “dogs” and should be translated “puppies.”

In the Kition plaque dogs and puppies (or better, their attendants) were thus paid a sum for services rendered, probably in the temples of Mukol or Resheph-Mukol. Thus, this plaque provides an important contemporaneous and complementary document for interpreting the hundreds of dog and puppy burials at Ashkelon.

Although I reiterate that we have thus far not found an actual temple or any other kind of architecture that can be associated with the dog burials at Ashkelon, I believe there was either a temple or a sacred precinct associated with the cemetery. We may yet find it.

The concentration of dog burials in a cemetery, the type of interment in unlined pits and the mortality profile of the dogs in the Ashkelon cemetery also resemble dog burials in Mesopotamia associated with the goddess of healing, Gula/Ninisina. Her healing cult flourished at several centers during the second and first millennia B.C.

Recently a temple dedicated to the goddess of healing was partially excavated at Nippur, in modern Iraq. A votive figurine of a man clutching his throat has been interpreted by the excavator, Professor MacGuire Gibson of the University of Chicago, as signifying the ailment of which the suppliant either hoped to be or was healed.²² In cuneiform texts the temple of this goddess of healing (Gula) is sometimes referred to as the “Dog House” (*é-ur-gi-ra*), and her emblem is the dog.²³

At Isin, another site in Mesopotamia, about 20 miles south of Nippur, numerous votive plaques and figurines depicting dogs were found in another temple of the healing goddess Gula. But even more revealing for our purposes were the 33 dog burials found in the ramp leading up to the temple. They, like the Ashkelon dogs, were buried in shallow pit graves, the carcass then being covered with soil. Although the sample of dogs excavated at Isin is quite small in comparison with Ashkelon, nevertheless, the mortality profile of the two dog populations is similar: At Isin, puppies comprised nearly half (15 of 33) of the dog burials; the

rest were adults and subadults. Like the dogs at Ashkelon, there were no signs that the Isin dogs had died of anything other than natural causes. Again like the dogs of Ashkelon, the Isin dogs were given careful burials regardless of age at death.²⁴ At Isin, however, the dog burials are clearly related to the temple of Gula, the goddess of healing. They were once the dogs of Gula, the goddess of healing. They roamed about the sacred precincts and participated in the healing rituals. The dogs buried at Ashkelon probably did the same thing.

Further Reading:

Animals

- [ReViews: Behold the Beasts](#) ([BAR](#) 36:05, Sep/Oct 2010)
- [Birth of Narrative Art](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
- [Caleb the Dog](#) ([BR](#) 20:02, Apr 2004)
- [The Dog Days of Ashkelon](#) ([BR](#) 20:02, Apr 2004)
- [Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
- [Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)
- [Exploring the Deep](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
- [Ancient Life: Sailing the Desert](#) ([AO](#) 5:05, Sep/Oct 2002)
- [The Iconography of Power](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/June 2002)
- [Sea Monsters and Other Ancient Beasts](#) ([AO](#) 5:02, Mar/Apr 2002)
- [The Iconography of Sea Monsters](#) ([AO](#) 5:02, Mar/Apr 2002)
- [Ancient Life: The Dog-Demon](#) ([AO](#) 5:01, Jan/Feb 2002)
- [Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
- [Detail](#) ([BR](#) 13:05, Oct 1997)
- [The Blood Taboo](#) ([BR](#) 13:04, Aug 1997)
- [Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 23:04, Jul/Aug 1997)
- [WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 22:06, Nov/Dec 1996)
- [Two Dogs, a Goat and a Partridge: An Archaeologist's Best Friends](#) ([BAR](#) 22:01, Jan/Feb 1996)
- [The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction](#) ([BAR](#) 22:01, Jan/Feb 1996)
- [WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:06, Nov/Dec 1995)
- [Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 21:02, Mar/Apr 1995)
- [Scorpion Ash Saves Woman's Eyesight](#) ([BR](#) 11:02, Apr 1995)
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- [Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)
- ["Subdue the Earth": What Does It Mean?](#) ([BR](#) 8:05, Oct 1992)
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- [Puzzling Public Buildings](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
- [Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
- [Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
- [Understanding Asherah—Exploring Semitic Iconography](#) ([BAR](#) 17:05, Sep/Oct 1991)
- [Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:05, Sep/Oct 1991)
- [Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites](#) ([BAR](#) 17:03, May/June 1991)
- [The Biblical Oryx—A New Name for an Ancient Animal](#) ([BAR](#) 10:05, Sep/Oct 1984)
- [Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 7:03, May/June 1981)
- [Animals of the Bible: Living Links to Antiquity](#) ([BAR](#) 7:01, Jan/Feb 1981)
- [Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 6:05, Sep/Oct 1980)
- ["Do You Know When the Ibexes Give Birth?"](#) ([BAR](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 1979)

Ashkelon

- [Ashkelon](#) (*The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, 2008)
- [Excavation Opportunities in 2015](#) (**BAR** 41:01, Jan/Feb 2015)
- [Where Are They Now?](#) (**BAR** 41:01, Jan/Feb 2015)
- [Uncover the Biblical World in 2014](#) (**BAR** 40:01, Jan/Feb 2014)
- [Buy Low, Sell High: The Marketplace at Ashkelon](#) (**BAR** 40:01, Jan/Feb 2014)
- [ReViews: Back-Breakers from Ashkelon and Hazor](#) (**BAR** 39:02, Mar/Apr 2013)
- [Dig In to Discover Your New Site](#) (**BAR** 39:01, Jan/Feb 2013)
- [Strata: Altar-ed Theories at Ashkelon](#) (**BAR** 38:03, May/June 2012)
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- [Archaeological Views: An Archaeologist's Journey from Volunteer to Field Director](#) (**BAR** 36:01, Jan/Feb 2010)
- [Ten Top Discoveries](#) (**BAR** 35:04, Jul/Aug Sep/Oct 2009)
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- [Yurco's Response](#) (**BAR** 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
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- [Queries & Comments](#) (**BAR** 14:05, Sep/Oct 1988)
- [1987 Annual Meeting in Boston: A Wild, Wonderful Academic Circus](#) (**BAR** 14:02, Mar/Apr 1988)
- [Hands On: No Grid Lock at Ashkelon—The View from the Square](#) (**BAR** 14:01, Jan/Feb 1988)
- [Restoring the Reputation of Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope](#) (**BAR** 10:04, Jul/Aug 1984)

Burial Sites and Customs

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- [WorldWide](#) (**BAR** 40:06, Nov/Dec 2014)
- [First Person: Human Sacrifice to an Ammonite God?](#) (**BAR** 40:05, Sep/Oct 2014)
- [Strata: To See or Not to See](#) (**BAR** 40:05, Sep/Oct 2014)
- [Infants Sacrificed? The Tale Teeth Tell](#) (**BAR** 40:04, Jul/Aug 2014)
- [Tombs for Mighty Rulers](#) (**BAR** 40:03, May/June 2014)

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[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)

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[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)

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[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)

[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)

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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)

[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)

[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)

[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 17:03, Jun 2001)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:03, May/June 2001)

[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)

[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)

[ReViews](#) ([BAR](#) 27:02, Mar/Apr 2001)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Destinations: City of the Dead](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
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[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 3:03, May/June 2000)
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[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:05, Nov/Dec 1999)
[Did a Rolling Stone Close Jesus' Tomb?](#) ([BAR](#) 25:05, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Who Lies Here?](#) ([BAR](#) 25:05, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 25:04, Jul/Aug 1999)
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[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:03, May/June 1998)
[Architecture of the Afterlife](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Complete Pyramids](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:02, Mar/Apr 1998)
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[PreViews](#) ([BAR](#) 23:02, Mar/Apr 1997)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 22:04, Jul/Aug 1996)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 22:04, Jul/Aug 1996)
[Behold the Temple](#) ([BAR](#) 22:03, May/Jun 1996)
[“God Knows Their Names”](#) ([BAR](#) 22:02, Mar/Apr 1996)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 22:01, Jan/Feb 1996)
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[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:05, Sep/Oct 1995)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 21:02, Mar/Apr 1995)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 20:05, Sep/Oct 1994)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 20:04, Jul/Aug 1994)
[The Tombs of Silwan](#) ([BAR](#) 20:03, May/Jun 1994)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 20:01, Jan/Feb 1994)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 19:06, Nov/Dec 1993)
[Unlocking the Mystery of Rogem Hiri](#) ([BAR](#) 19:04, Jul/Aug 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:01, Jan/Feb 1993)
[Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Caiaphas Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
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[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Mystery Circles](#) ([BAR](#) 18:04, Jul/Aug 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:03, May/Jun 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:02, Mar/Apr 1990)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 13:02, Mar/Apr 1987)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 13:01, Jan/Feb 1987)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 11:03, May/Jun 1985)
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[Strata: The Other Side of the Coin](#) ([BAR](#) 40:04, Jul/Aug 2014)
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[Strata: Did Jesus Know This Face?](#) ([BAR](#) 36:02, Mar/Apr 2010)
[The "New Cleopatra" and the Jewish Tax](#) ([BAR](#) 36:01, Jan/February 2010)
[Strata: Milestones](#) ([BAR](#) 33:04, Jul/Aug 2007)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 31:01, Jan/February 2005)
[Strata: Yaakov Meshorer, 1935–2004](#) ([BAR](#) 30:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
[Origins: Filthy Lucre](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
[Healing Waters](#) ([BAR](#) 30:04, Jul/Aug 2004)
[Strata: Brother, Can You Spare a Tetradrachm?](#) ([BAR](#) 30:04, Jul/Aug 2004)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 7:04, Jul/Aug 2004)
[Ancient Life: Minting Maps](#) ([AO](#) 7:01, Jan/February 2004)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 29:05, Sep/Oct 2003)
[Death at Kourion](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Spending Your Way through Jewish History](#) ([BAR](#) 29:03, May/June 2003)
[What Jesus Really Meant by "Render Unto Caesar"](#) ([BR](#) 19:02, Apr 2003)
[Exploring the Deep](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/February 2003)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 26:03, May/June 2000)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 26:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 25:06, Nov/December 1999)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:03, May/June 1999)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:02, Mar/Apr 1999)
[Governments-in-Exile](#) ([BAR](#) 24:06, Nov/December 1998)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 20:01, Jan/February 1994)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)

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[Gamla: Portrait of a Rebellion](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
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[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[The Synagogue at Meroth: Does It Fix Israel's Northern Border in Second Temple Times?](#) ([BAR](#) 15:02, Mar/Apr 1989)
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[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 2:02, Summer 1986)
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[The Other Side of the Coin](#) ([BAR](#) 7:02, Mar/Apr 1981)
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[Was She Really Stoned?](#) ([AO](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 2002)
[Moab Comes to Life](#) ([BAR](#) 28:01, Jan/Feb 2002)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Picturing Imageless Deities](#) ([BAR](#) 23:03, May/Jun 1997)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 23:02, Mar/Apr 1997)
[Edomites Advance into Judah](#) ([BAR](#) 22:06, Nov/Dec 1996)
[What's a Bamah? How Sacred Space Functioned in Ancient Israel](#) ([BAR](#) 20:03, May/Jun 1994)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Deities and Dogs—Their Sacred Rites](#) ([BAR](#) 17:03, May/Jun 1991)
[BAR Scholarships Available to Arabs and Israelis to Deliver Papers at Annual Meeting](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 15:01, Jan/Feb 1989)
[On Cult Places and Early Israelites: A Response to Michael Coogan](#) ([BAR](#) 14:04, Jul/Aug 1988)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 14:04, Jul/Aug 1988)
[The Route Through Sinai: Why the Israelites Fleeing Egypt Went South](#) ([BAR](#) 14:03, May/Jun 1988)
[New Light on the Edomites](#) ([BAR](#) 14:02, Mar/Apr 1988)
[Two Early Israelite Cult Sites Now Questioned](#) ([BAR](#) 14:01, Jan/Feb 1988)
[Horned Altar for Animal Sacrifice Unearthed at Beer-Sheva](#) ([BAR](#) 1:01, Mar 1975)

Egypt/Egyptians

[Introduction](#) (*Aspects of Monotheism*, 1996)
[How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite](#) (*The Rise of Ancient Israel*, 1991)
[Strata: \\$27 Million Consoles a British Museum](#) ([BAR](#) 41:01, Jan/Feb 2015)

[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 40:06, Nov/Dec 2014)
[Strata: To See or Not to See](#) ([BAR](#) 40:05, Sep/Oct 2014)
[ReViews: Bringing Archaeology to the Public](#) ([BAR](#) 40:03, May/June 2014)
[Strata: Severed Hands: Trophies of War in New Kingdom Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 40:02, Mar/Apr 2014)
[ReViews: Catalog Capsule](#) ([BAR](#) 40:01, Jan/Feb 2014)
[Aegeans Abroad](#) ([BAR](#) 39:04, Jul/Aug 2013)
[Strata: Pharaoh Merneptah's Massive Burial Box](#) ([BAR](#) 39:03, May/June 2013)
[The Persisting Uncertainties of Kuntilet 'Ajrud](#) ([BAR](#) 38:06, Nov/Dec 2012)
[First Person: Should Israel Return the Tablets of the Law to Egypt?](#) ([BAR](#) 38:05, Sep/Oct 2012)
[Was King Saul Impaled on the Wall of Beth Shean?](#) ([BAR](#) 38:02, Mar/Apr 2012)
[Catalog Capsule](#) ([BAR](#) 38:02, Mar/Apr 2012)
[Egypt's Chief Archaeologist Defends His Rights \(and Wrongs\)](#) ([BAR](#) 37:03, May/June 2011)
[Hawass Becomes Target, Resigns, Reappointed](#) ([BAR](#) 37:03, May/June 2011)
[Biblical Views: The Pharaoh, the Bible and Liberation \(Square\)](#) ([BAR](#) 37:03, May/June 2011)
[Archaeological Views: A Case Against the Repatriation of Archaeological Artifacts](#) ([BAR](#) 37:03, May/June 2011)
[The Oxyrhynchus Papyri](#) ([BAR](#) 37:02, Mar/Apr 2011)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 37:02, Mar/Apr 2011)
[Strata: Radiocarbon Dating Confirms Egyptian/Israelite Chronology](#) ([BAR](#) 36:05, Sep/Oct 2010)
[How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs](#) ([BAR](#) 36:02, Mar/Apr 2010)
[Strata: Ritual Bath or Swimming Pool?](#) ([BAR](#) 34:03, May/June 2008)
[Why Did Joseph Shave?](#) ([BAR](#) 33:04, Jul/Aug 2007)
[Circumcision](#) ([BAR](#) 32:04, Jul/Aug 2006)
[When a Woman Ruled Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 32:02, Mar/Apr 2006)
[Past Perfect: Finding Akhenaten's Daughter](#) ([AO](#) 9:01, Jan/Feb 2006)
[Ancient Life: An Ancient Scourge](#) ([AO](#) 8:06, Nov/Dec 2005)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 8:05, Sep/Oct 2005)
[How to Date a Pharaoh](#) ([AO](#) 8:04, Jul/Aug 2005)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 8:04, Jul/Aug 2005)
["Place of the Beautiful Ones"](#) ([AO](#) 8:02, Mar/Apr 2005)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 7:06, Nov/Dec 2004)
[Past Perfect: Unearthing the Fayum Paintings](#) ([AO](#) 7:06, Nov/Dec 2004)
[Narmer's Enigmatic Palette](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
[Ancient Life: Sustaining Ka](#) ([AO](#) 7:04, Jul/Aug 2004)
[Past Perfect: Along the Nile](#) ([AO](#) 7:02, Mar/Apr 2004)
[Ancient Life: Cats](#) ([AO](#) 7:02, Mar/Apr 2004)
[ReViews](#) ([BAR](#) 30:01, Jan/Feb 2004)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 30:01, Jan/Feb 2004)
[Jots & Tittles](#) ([BR](#) 19:06, Dec 2003)
[Philistine Fashion](#) ([BAR](#) 29:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[Past Perfect: In a Dry Country](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[Ancient Life: The Eyes Have It](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[Cyrus the Messiah](#) ([BR](#) 19:05, Oct 2003)
[Israelites Found in Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 29:05, Sep/Oct 2003)
[The Harris Papyrus: The Mighty Deeds of Ramesses III](#) ([BAR](#) 29:05, Sep/Oct 2003)
["Look on My Works"](#) ([AO](#) 6:05, Sep/Oct 2003)

[Priceless Garbage](#) ([BAR](#) 29:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Past Perfect: In Defense of the Realm](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Moses' Egyptian Name](#) ([BR](#) 19:03, Jun 2003)
[Personal Piety: A Direct Line to God](#) ([BR](#) 19:03, Jun 2003)
[Drowning the Past](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/Jun 2003)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/Jun 2003)
[Beasts or Bugs?](#) ([BR](#) 19:02, Apr 2003)
[Sardinians in Israel?](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)
[Past Perfect: Reading the Rosetta Stone](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)
[Ancient Life: "Come Down, Placenta!"](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
[Past Perfect: On Terra Sancta](#) ([AO](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 2002)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 2002)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 28:05, Sep/Oct 2002)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 28:05, Sep/Oct 2002)
[Archaeology Odyssey's 10 Most Endangered Sites](#) ([AO](#) 5:05, Sep/Oct 2002)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 5:05, Sep/Oct 2002)
[Lasting Impressions](#) ([BAR](#) 28:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Newly Unveiled Seal Impression Attests Another Biblical Figure](#) ([BAR](#) 28:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Past Perfect: King Tut, I Presume?](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Philistine Kin Found in Early Israel](#) ([BAR](#) 28:03, May/Jun 2002)
[The Nuragic Civilization of Sardinia—A Link to Ancient Israel?](#) ([BAR](#) 28:03, May/Jun 2002)
[The Shaft Tombs of Abusir](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/Jun 2002)
[Uncovering Abusir: The Czech Institute of Egyptology](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/Jun 2002)
[The Iconography of Power](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/Jun 2002)
[Past Perfect: The Ridiculous and the Sublime](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/Jun 2002)
[Ancient Life: Crowning Glory](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/Jun 2002)
[Past Perfect: Sacred Shadows](#) ([AO](#) 5:01, Jan/Feb 2002)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[Past Perfect: On a Cook's Tour](#) ([AO](#) 4:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[How We Know When Solomon Ruled](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[When Civilization Collapsed](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Invasions of the Sea Peoples](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Eros in Egypt](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[King Hezekiah's Seal Revisited](#) ([BAR](#) 27:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[Past Perfect: Dominique Vivant Denon](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[When Palestine Meant Israel](#) ([BAR](#) 27:03, May/Jun 2001)
[When a Mittani Princess Joined Pharaoh's Harem](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/Jun 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/Jun 2001)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 17:02, Apr 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Past Perfect: Over the Bounding Main](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)

[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[Past Perfect: In Undiscovered Country](#) ([AO](#) 4:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[The Divine Warrior in His Tent](#) ([BR](#) 16:06, Dec 2000)
[The Battle of Kadesh](#) ([BR](#) 16:06, Dec 2000)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 26:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Mummies](#) ([AO](#) 3:05, Sep/Oct 2000)
[How Reliable Is Exodus?](#) ([BAR](#) 26:04, Jul/Aug 2000)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 26:04, Jul/Aug 2000)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 3:04, Jul/Aug 2000)
[What Was Josiah Thinking?](#) ([BR](#) 16:03, Jun 2000)
[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 16:03, Jun 2000)
[What's an Egyptian Temple Doing in Jerusalem?](#) ([BAR](#) 26:03, May/June 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 3:03, May/June 2000)
[Ancient Life: Ancient Egyptian dreambook](#) ([AO](#) 3:03, May/June 2000)
[Will Tel Rehov Save the United Monarchy?](#) ([BAR](#) 26:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 26:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 3:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Past Perfect: Beneath the Pyramids](#) ([AO](#) 3:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Talk Like an Egyptian](#) ([BR](#) 16:01, Feb 2000)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 26:01, Jan/Feb 2000)
[Destinations: The Oasis of Amun Siwa, Egypt](#) ([AO](#) 3:01, Jan/Feb 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:05, Nov/Dec 1999)
[Past Perfect: Away from the Big Top](#) ([AO](#) 2:05, Nov/Dec 1999)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 2:05, Nov/Dec 1999)
[Architecture of Infinity](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[The Creation of the Cosmos](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[The Lowdown on the Riffraff](#) ([BR](#) 15:04, Aug 1999)
[In the Words of Hatshepsut](#) ([BR](#) 15:04, Aug 1999)
[Monotheism](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[Akhenaten's Hymn to Light](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[The Egyptian Pantheon](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[Past Perfect: On a Mission from God](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:03, May/June 1999)
[Who Really Built the Pyramids?](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Has David Been Found in Egypt?](#) ([BAR](#) 25:01, Jan/Feb 1999)
[Pharaoh's Workers: How the Israelites Lived in Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 25:01, Jan/Feb 1999)
[The Enigma of Hatshepsut](#) ([AO](#) 2:01, Winter 1999)
[Breaking the Incest Taboo](#) ([AO](#) 2:01, Winter 1999)
[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 14:06, Dec 1998)
[Cultural Crossroads](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)
["This is the Taste of Death"](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[A Bestseller from Ancient Egypt](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[The Forum: Taking Issue](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[From the Land of the Bow](#) ([BR](#) 14:04, Aug 1998)

[The Etruscans](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[Past Perfect: An Artist in an Antique Land](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[The Egyptianizing of Canaan](#) ([BAR](#) 24:03, May/Jun 1998)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 24:03, May/Jun 1998)
[In Pharaoh's Footsteps](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Architecture of the Afterlife](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Complete Pyramids](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:02, Mar/Apr 1998)
[ReViews](#) ([BAR](#) 24:02, Mar/Apr 1998)
[Let My People Go and Go and Go and Go](#) ([BAR](#) 24:01, Jan/Feb 1998)
[First Person: A Name in Search of a Story](#) ([BAR](#) 24:01, Jan/Feb 1998)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 24:01, Jan/Feb 1998)
[Son of God](#) ([BR](#) 13:03, Jun 1997)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 23:03, May/Jun 1997)
[PreViews](#) ([BAR](#) 23:02, Mar/Apr 1997)
[The Ancient Library of Alexandria](#) ([BR](#) 13:01, Feb 1997)
[PreViews](#) ([BAR](#) 23:01, Jan/Feb 1997)
[Backward Glance: An Archaeologist Before His Time](#) ([BAR](#) 22:06, Nov/Dec 1996)
[BARlines](#) ([BAR](#) 22:03, May/Jun 1996)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 22:01, Jan/Feb 1996)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:05, Sep/Oct 1995)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 21:05, Sep/Oct 1995)
[BARlines](#) ([BAR](#) 21:04, Jul/Aug 1995)
[Did the Ark Stop at Elephantine?](#) ([BAR](#) 21:03, May/Jun 1995)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 21:03, May/Jun 1995)
[BARlines](#) ([BAR](#) 21:03, May/Jun 1995)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:03, May/Jun 1995)
[The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?](#) ([BAR](#) 21:02, Mar/Apr 1995)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 20:06, Nov/Dec 1994)
[Exodus Itinerary Confirmed by Egyptian Evidence](#) ([BAR](#) 20:05, Sep/Oct 1994)
[Bible Quiz](#) ([BR](#) 10:04, Aug 1994)
[Peace, Politics and Archaeology](#) ([BAR](#) 20:02, Mar/Apr 1994)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 20:01, Jan/Feb 1994)
[Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?](#) ([BR](#) 9:06, Dec 1993)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 19:06, Nov/Dec 1993)
[An Ancient Israelite House in Egypt?](#) ([BAR](#) 19:04, Jul/Aug 1993)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/Jun 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/Jun 1993)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 19:01, Jan/Feb 1993)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 19:01, Jan/Feb 1993)
[New Mosaic Art from Sepphoris](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)
[How Did the Philistines Enter Canaan? A Rejoinder](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[BARlines](#) ([BAR](#) 18:03, May/Jun 1992)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:03, May/June 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:02, Mar/Apr 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
[Rainey's Challenge](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Yurco's Response](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[The Sea Peoples and Their Contributions to Civilization](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[The Philistines Enter Canaan](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Understanding Asherah—Exploring Semitic Iconography](#) ([BAR](#) 17:05, Sep/Oct 1991)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:05, Sep/Oct 1991)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:04, Jul/Aug 1991)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:03, May/June 1991)
[BARlines](#) ([BAR](#) 17:03, May/June 1991)
[Drama of the Exodus](#) ([BR](#) 7:01, Feb 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:01, Jan/Feb 1991)
[3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 16:05, Sep/Oct 1990)
[Glossary: Coffins in a Human Shape](#) ([BAR](#) 16:04, Jul/Aug 1990)
[Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues](#) ([BR](#) 6:03, June 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:02, Mar/Apr 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:01, Jan/Feb 1990)
[Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White?](#) ([BAR](#) 15:05, Sep/Oct 1989)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 15:03, May/June 1989)
[Dever Stars at Lackluster Annual Meeting](#) ([BAR](#) 15:02, Mar/Apr 1989)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 15:02, Mar/Apr 1989)
[Jacob in History](#) ([BAR](#) 14:01, Jan/Feb 1988)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 13:05, Sep/Oct 1987)
[The Monotheism of the Heretic Pharaoh](#) ([BAR](#) 13:03, May/June 1987)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 11:06, Nov/Dec 1985)
[You Too Can Read Hieroglyphics](#) ([BAR](#) 11:04, Jul/Aug 1985)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 11:04, Jul/Aug 1985)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 10:06, Nov/Dec 1984)
[Red Sea or Reed Sea?](#) ([BAR](#) 10:04, Jul/Aug 1984)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 9:04, Jul/Aug 1983)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 9:01, Jan/Feb 1983)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 7:06, Nov/Dec 1981)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 1981)
[The First Peace Treaty Between Israel and Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 5:05, Sep/Oct 1979)
[An Ancient Boat's Modern Ordeal](#) ([BAR](#) 3:04, Dec 1977)
[Papyrus Manufacture Once Again a Monopoly in Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 2:02, June 1976)
[Archaeological Work in Arabia Now Possible](#) ([BAR](#) 1:02, June 1975)

Fire

[Rediscovered! The Land of Geshur](#) ([BAR](#) 18:04, Jul/Aug 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:02, Mar/Apr 1992)
[The Last Days and Hours at Masada](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[The Aleppo Codex](#) ([BR](#) 7:04, Aug 1991)

Greece/Greeks

[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 39:05, Sep/Oct 2013)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 36:02, Mar/Apr 2010)

[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 34:06, Nov/Dec 2008)
[Past Perfect: Pottery in Motion](#) ([BAR](#) 32:03, May/June 2006)
[Asklepios Appears in a Dream](#) ([AO](#) 8:04, Jul/Aug 2005)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 8:04, Jul/Aug 2005)
[East Meets West](#) ([AO](#) 8:02, Mar/Apr 2005)
[Ancient Life: Tying the Knot](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
[Strata: Brother, Can You Spare a Tetradrachm?](#) ([BAR](#) 30:04, Jul/Aug 2004)
[Origins: Tuning Up](#) ([AO](#) 7:03, May/June 2004)
[Strata: What Is It?](#) ([BAR](#) 30:01, Jan/Feb 2004)
[Mankillers](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[Male Fantasies](#) ([AO](#) 6:05, Sep/Oct 2003)
[Death at Kourion](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Kourion Through the Millennia](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Editors' Page: Crossing Over on Cyprus](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)
[Origins: Reasons to Believe](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)
[Ancient Life: Liquid Gold](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)
[Worldwide](#) ([BAR](#) 29:02, Mar/Apr 2003)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)
[Ancient Life: Heavens!](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)
[Sailing the Open Seas](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
[Naked and the Nude](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
[Past Perfect: In the Footsteps of Pausanias](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
[Cypriot Land Mines](#) ([AO](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 2002)
[Was She Really Stoned?](#) ([AO](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 2002)
[The New Trojan Wars](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Greeks vs. Hittites](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Lay That Ghost](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Destinations: Punic Double Take](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Paul at the Races](#) ([BR](#) 18:03, June 2002)
[Iphigenia & Isaac](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/June 2002)
[Sea Monsters and Other Ancient Beasts](#) ([AO](#) 5:02, Mar/Apr 2002)
[Ancient Life: Shooting the Moon](#) ([AO](#) 5:02, Mar/Apr 2002)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[Past Perfect: The Omphalos and the Oracle](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 27:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 27:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[Imagining Buddha](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[Debunking the Copy Myth](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[Discovering Modesty](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[Origins: And the Verdict Is ...](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[Ideology from Artifacts](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Ancient Life: The Life of the Fairer Sex](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)

[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 27:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[Origins: ...And by the People](#) ([AO](#) 4:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 4:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 4:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 16:06, Dec 2000)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 26:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Iconoclasm](#) ([BR](#) 16:05, Oct 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 3:05, Sep/Oct 2000)
[Ancient Life: Greek Fire](#) ([AO](#) 3:05, Sep/Oct 2000)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 3:05, Sep/Oct 2000)
[The Resurrection of Resurrection](#) ([BR](#) 16:04, Aug 2000)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 26:04, Jul/Aug 2000)
[Origins: The First Act](#) ([AO](#) 3:04, Jul/Aug 2000)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 3:04, Jul/Aug 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 3:03, May/June 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 3:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 3:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[Destinations: The Gateway to Hell](#) ([AO](#) 3:02, Mar/Apr 2000)
[ReViews](#) ([BAR](#) 26:01, Jan/Feb 2000)
[Georgia Through the Millennia](#) ([AO](#) 3:01, Jan/Feb 2000)
[Destinations: Sounion, Greece](#) ([AO](#) 2:05, Nov/Dec 1999)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[The Master from Apulia](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 2:01, Winter 1999)
[Past Perfect: A Novelist Among the Ruins](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[The Forum: Taking Issue](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[Leave the Marbles Where They Are!](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Bring the Marbles Home!](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Lord Elgin's Marbles](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[What Are the Elgin Marbles?](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[How the Marbles Changed History](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Birth of Adonis?](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Origins: Ptolemy Charts the World](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Searching for the Historical Homer](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[Reading Homer After 2,800 Years](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[The Semites or the Greeks?](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[A Different View](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 23:06, Nov/Dec 1997)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 22:06, Nov/Dec 1996)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:04, Jul/Aug 1995)

[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 20:05, Sep/Oct 1994)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/June 1993)
[Jewish Funerary Inscriptions—Most Are in Greek](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:04, Jul/Aug 1991)
[Ancient Aromas](#) ([BR](#) 7:03, Jun 1991)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 17:03, May/June 1991)
[The Massive Middle Bronze Fortifications—How Did They Work?](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[Classical Scholarship—Anti-Black and Anti-Semitic?](#) ([BR](#) 6:03, Jun 1990)
[First Glance](#) ([BR](#) 6:03, Jun 1990)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 13:06, Nov/Dec 1987)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 11:04, Jul/Aug 1985)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 11:01, Jan/Feb 1985)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 1981)

Persia/Persian Period/Achaemenid Period

[ReViews: Handsome Publication Reveals Life in Persian Empire](#) ([BAR](#) 39:06, Nov/Dec 2013)
[Strata: Exhibit Watch: Cyrus Cylinder Begins American Tour](#) ([BAR](#) 39:03, May/June 2013)
[Bells, Pendants, Snakes & Stones](#) ([BAR](#) 36:06, Nov/Dec 2010)
[Strata: Ancient Persians Massacre Jerusalem Christians](#) ([BAR](#) 36:06, Nov/Dec 2010)
[Making \(Up\) History](#) ([AO](#) 8:06, Nov/Dec 2005)
[Life and Death on the Israel-Lebanon Border](#) ([BAR](#) 31:05, Sep/Oct 2005)
[Big City, Few People](#) ([BAR](#) 31:04, Jul/Aug 2005)
[The First Declaration of Human Rights: The Cyrus Cylinder](#) ([BAR](#) 31:04, Jul/Aug 2005)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)
[Another Temple to the Israelite God](#) ([BAR](#) 30:04, Jul/Aug 2004)
[Cyrus the Messiah](#) ([BR](#) 19:05, Oct 2003)
[Who Wrote Second Isaiah?](#) ([BR](#) 19:05, Oct 2003)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Introduction](#) ([BAR](#) 28:03, May/June 2002)
[There Was No Gap](#) ([BAR](#) 28:03, May/June 2002)
[Yes There Was](#) ([BAR](#) 28:03, May/June 2002)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 24:02, Mar/Apr 1998)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 23:03, May/June 1997)
[Bible Books](#) ([BR](#) 13:02, Apr 1997)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 23:01, Jan/Feb 1997)
[The Many Masters of Dor, Part 3: The Persistence of Phoenician Culture](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/June 1993)
[The Book of Esther](#) ([BR](#) 8:01, Feb 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Beauty and Utility in Bone](#) ([BAR](#) 17:04, Jul/Aug 1991)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 10:05, Sep/Oct 1984)

Phoenicians

[Cedars of Lebanon: Exploring the Roots](#) ([BAR](#) 39:03, May/June 2013)
[Achziv Cemeteries: Buried Treasure from Israel's Phoenician Neighbor](#) ([BAR](#) 36:05, Sep/Oct 2010)
[Tools of Their Trades?](#) ([BAR](#) 36:05, Sep/Oct 2010)

[Strata: Return of the Ancient Mariner](#) ([BAR](#) 34:04, Jul/Aug 2008)
[Excavating Ekron](#) ([BAR](#) 31:06, Nov/Dec 2005)
[Sacred Precincts](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)
[The Search for Biblical Blue](#) ([BR](#) 19:01, Feb 2003)
[Sailing the Open Seas](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 28:06, Nov/Dec 2002)
[Destinations: Punic Double Take](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[King Hezekiah's Seal Revisited](#) ([BAR](#) 27:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[Were living Children Sacrificed to the Gods? No](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Were living Children Sacrificed to the Gods? Yes](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
["Carthage Must be Destroyed"](#) ([AO](#) 3:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 25:05, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:05, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:04, Jul/Aug 1999)
[Past Perfect: On a Mission from God](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[Tripartite Buildings: Divided Structures Divide Scholars](#) ([BAR](#) 25:03, May/June 1999)
[King Hezekiah's Seal Bears Phoenician Imagery](#) ([BAR](#) 25:02, Mar/Apr 1999)
[Buried Treasure: The Silver Hoard from Dor](#) ([BAR](#) 24:04, Jul/Aug 1998)
[The Birth of Adonis?](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Semites or the Greeks?](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[A Different View](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 23:01, Jan/Feb 1997)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 22:05, Sep/Oct 1996)
[From Death to Resurrection: The Early Evidence](#) ([BAR](#) 21:05, Sep/Oct 1995)
[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:01, Jan/Feb 1995)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:06, Nov/Dec 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:04, Jul/Aug 1993)
[The Many Masters of Dor, Part 3: The Persistence of Phoenician Culture](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/June 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/June 1993)
[The Many Masters of Dor, Part 2: How Bad Was Ahab?](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)
[Cabul: A Royal Gift Found](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)
[The Many Masters of Dor, Part 1: When Canaanites Became Phoenician Sailors](#) ([BAR](#) 19:01, Jan/Feb 1993)
[Excavating an Ancient Merchantman](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Rediscovered! The Land of Geshur](#) ([BAR](#) 18:04, Jul/Aug 1992)
[The Sea Peoples and Their Contributions to Civilization](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Glossary: Coffins in a Human Shape](#) ([BAR](#) 16:04, Jul/Aug 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:04, Jul/Aug 1990)
[Volunteer's Report: Searching for the Phoenicians in Sardinia](#) ([BAR](#) 16:01, Jan/Feb 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 15:06, Nov/Dec 1989)
[What Happened to the Cult Figurines? Israelite Religion Purified After the Exile](#) ([BAR](#) 15:04, July/Aug 1989)
[Is This Solomon's Seaport?](#) ([BAR](#) 15:04, July/Aug 1989)
[Phoenicians in Brazil?](#) ([BAR](#) 5:01, Jan/Feb 1979)

Pottery

[The Other "Philistines"](#) ([BAR](#) 40:06, Nov/Dec 2014)

[The New Jerusalem Inscription—So What?](#) ([BAR](#) 40:03, May/June 2014)

[Buy Low, Sell High: The Marketplace at Ashkelon](#) ([BAR](#) 40:01, Jan/Feb 2014)

[Biblical Views: Sacred Meat](#) ([BAR](#) 40:01, Jan/Feb 2014)

[Archaeological Views: Going to Pot: The Love-Hate Relationship of an Archaeologist and Her Pottery](#) ([BAR](#) 36:03, May/June 2010)

[Why Milk and Meat Don't Mix](#) ([BAR](#) 34:06, Nov/Dec 2008)

[Archaeological Views: A Career at One Site](#) ([BAR](#) 33:04, Jul/Aug 2007)

[Strata: Whither Goliath?](#) ([BAR](#) 33:03, May/June 2007)

[Archaeological Views: Why Pottery Matters](#) ([BAR](#) 33:01, Jan/Feb 2007)

[Qumran—The Pottery Factory](#) ([BAR](#) 32:05, Sep/Oct 2006)

[Past Perfect: Pottery in Motion](#) ([BAR](#) 32:03, May/June 2006)

[Did I Find King David's Palace?](#) ([BAR](#) 32:01, Jan/Feb 2006)

[Mycenaeans Were There Before the Israelites](#) ([BAR](#) 31:05, Sep/Oct 2005)

[The Mysterious "Cultic Corner"](#) ([BAR](#) 30:06, Nov/Dec 2004)

[Weeds & Seeds](#) ([BAR](#) 30:06, Nov/Dec 2004)

[Birth of Narrative Art](#) ([AO](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 2004)

[Pottery Talks](#) ([BAR](#) 30:02, Mar/Apr 2004)

[How Did the Philistines Get to Canaan? One: by Sea](#) ([BAR](#) 29:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[How Did the Philistines Get to Canaan? Two: by Land](#) ([BAR](#) 29:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[Does Amihai Mazar Agree with Finkelstein's "Low Chronology"?](#) ([BAR](#) 29:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[Worldwide](#) ([BAR](#) 29:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[What's For Dinner? The Answer Is In the Pot](#) ([BAR](#) 25:06, Nov/Dec 1999)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:02, Mar/Apr 1999)

[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 25:01, Jan/Feb 1999)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:01, Jan/Feb 1999)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 24:06, Nov/Dec 1998)

[Cultural Crossroads](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)

[Ancient Israel's Stone Age](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)

[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)

[It's Not There: Archaeology Proves a Negative](#) ([BAR](#) 24:04, Jul/Aug 1998)

[It Is There: The Archaeological Evidence Proves It](#) ([BAR](#) 24:04, Jul/Aug 1998)

[It Is There: Ancient Texts Prove It](#) ([BAR](#) 24:04, Jul/Aug 1998)

[Buried Treasure: The Silver Hoard from Dor](#) ([BAR](#) 24:04, Jul/Aug 1998)

[Scholar's Bookshelf](#) ([BAR](#) 24:03, May/June 1998)

[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)

[Invoking the Spirit](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 23:02, Mar/Apr 1997)

[Edomites Advance into Judah](#) ([BAR](#) 22:06, Nov/Dec 1996)

[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 20:01, Jan/Feb 1994)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 20:01, Jan/Feb 1994)

[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 19:06, Nov/Dec 1993)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:06, Nov/Dec 1993)

[The Philistines and the Dothans: An Archaeological Romance, Part 2](#) ([BAR](#) 19:05, Sep/Oct 1993)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:04, Jul/Aug 1993)

[The Many Masters of Dor, Part 3: The Persistence of Phoenician Culture](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/June 1993)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:03, May/June 1993)

[Cabul: A Royal Gift Found](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)

[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:01, Jan/Feb 1993)

[Excavating an Ancient Merchantman](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)

[How Did the Philistines Enter Canaan? A Rejoinder](#) ([BAR](#) 18:06, Nov/Dec 1992)
[Glossary: How to Date a Cooking Pot](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
[Rediscovered! The Land of Geshur](#) ([BAR](#) 18:04, Jul/Aug 1992)
[Mystery Circles](#) ([BAR](#) 18:04, Jul/Aug 1992)
[A Thousand Years of History in Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter](#) ([BAR](#) 18:03, May/June 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:03, May/June 1992)
[Puzzling Public Buildings](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
[The Sea Peoples and Their Contributions to Civilization](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[The Philistines Enter Canaan](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
[Israel Enters Canaan—Following the Pottery Trail](#) ([BAR](#) 17:05, Sep/Oct 1991)
[Using Pottery Forms and Width Stratigraphy to Trace Population Movements](#) ([BAR](#) 17:05, Sep/Oct 1991)
[When Canaanites and Philistines Ruled Ashkelon](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[The Massive Middle Bronze Fortifications—How Did They Work?](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 17:02, Mar/Apr 1991)
[High Art from the Time of Abraham](#) ([BAR](#) 17:01, Jan/Feb 1991)
[Jericho Was Destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, Not the Late Bronze Age](#) ([BAR](#) 16:05, Sep/Oct 1990)
[Dating Jericho's Destruction: Bienkowski Is Wrong on All Counts](#) ([BAR](#) 16:05, Sep/Oct 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:05, Sep/Oct 1990)
[Small Inventions? They Changed How People Lived in the Hellenistic Age](#) ([BAR](#) 16:04, Jul/Aug 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:04, Jul/Aug 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:03, May/June 1990)
[Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence](#) ([BAR](#) 16:02, Mar/Apr 1990)
[Ekron of the Philistines, Part I: Where They Came From, How They Settled Down and the Place They Worshipped In](#) ([BAR](#) 16:01, Jan/Feb 1990)
[Royal Gateway to Ancient Jerusalem Uncovered](#) ([BAR](#) 15:03, May/June 1989)
[Searching for Israelite Origins](#) ([BAR](#) 14:05, Sep/Oct 1988)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 14:04, Jul/Aug 1988)
[New Light on the Edomites](#) ([BAR](#) 14:02, Mar/Apr 1988)
[Why Is a Bilbil Called a Bilbil?](#) ([BAR](#) 14:01, Jan/Feb 1988)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 14:01, Jan/Feb 1988)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 13:05, Sep/Oct 1987)
[Arad—An Ancient Israelite Fortress with a Temple to Yahweh](#) ([BAR](#) 13:02, Mar/Apr 1987)
[Lighting the Way Through History](#) ([BAR](#) 11:02, Mar/Apr 1985)
[BAR Jr.: Sherds, Sherds, Sherds](#) ([BAR](#) 8:04, Jul/Aug 1982)
[BAR Jr.: On the Surface](#) ([BAR](#) 8:02, Mar/Apr 1982)
[BAR Jr.: Housewares and Recipes from 2,000 Years Ago](#) ([BAR](#) 7:05, Sep/Oct 1981)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 7:02, Mar/Apr 1981)
[Answers at Lachish](#) ([BAR](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 1979)
[Mystery Find at Lachish](#) ([BAR](#) 5:05, Sep/Oct 1979)
[Israel's Archaeological Gifts to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat](#) ([BAR](#) 4:01, Mar 1978)
[Using Neutron Activation Analysis to Establish the Provenance of Pottery](#) ([BAR](#) 2:01, Mar 1976)
[Did the Philistines Destroy the Israelite Sanctuary at Shiloh?—The Archaeological Evidence](#) ([BAR](#) 1:02, Jun 1975)

Tombs

[Queen Helena's Jerusalem Palace—In a Parking Lot?](#) ([BAR](#) 40:03, May/June 2014)
[Was Herod's Tomb Really Found?](#) ([BAR](#) 40:03, May/June 2014)

[Tombs for Mighty Rulers](#) ([BAR](#) 40:03, May/June 2014)

[A World Below](#) ([BAR](#) 39:05, Sep/Oct 2013)

[Early Israel: An Egalitarian Society](#) ([BAR](#) 39:04, Jul/Aug 2013)

[The Christian Flight to Pella: True or Tale?](#) ([BAR](#) 39:03, May/June 2013)

[“The Lord Is One”: How Its Meaning Changed](#) ([BAR](#) 39:03, May/June 2013)

[Strata: Pharaoh Merneptah’s Massive Burial Box](#) ([BAR](#) 39:03, May/June 2013)

[Who Was Buried in the Tomb of Pharaoh’s Daughter?](#) ([BAR](#) 39:01, Jan/Feb 2013)

[Past Portraits: Early Pictures and Descriptions of the Tomb of Pharaoh’s Daughter](#) ([BAR](#) 39:01, Jan/Feb 2013)

[Is T1 David’s Tomb?](#) ([BAR](#) 38:06, Nov/Dec 2012)

[Death at the Dead Sea](#) ([BAR](#) 38:02, Mar/Apr 2012)

[Strata: Philip’s Tomb Discovered—But Not Where Expected](#) ([BAR](#) 38:01, Jan/Feb 2012)

[The Necropolis of Hierapolis](#) ([BAR](#) 37:04, Jul/Aug 2011)

[First Person: Ketef Hinnom](#) ([BAR](#) 37:01, Jan/Feb 2011)

[Achziv Cemeteries: Buried Treasure from Israel’s Phoenician Neighbor](#) ([BAR](#) 36:05, Sep/Oct 2010)

[Tools of Their Trades?](#) ([BAR](#) 36:05, Sep/Oct 2010)

[Another View: Don’t Be So Quick to be Disappointed, David Ussishkin](#) ([BAR](#) 34:02, Mar/Apr 2008)

[Another View: The Disappearance of Two Royal Burials](#) ([BAR](#) 33:06, Nov/Dec 2007)

[Lost Tombs of the Israelite Kings](#) ([BAR](#) 33:04, Jul/Aug 2007)

[Monumental Tombs from Maussollos to the Maccabees](#) ([BAR](#) 33:03, May/June 2007)

[What Did Jesus’ Tomb Look Like?](#) ([BAR](#) 32:01, Jan/Feb 2006)

[Mycenaeans Were There Before the Israelites](#) ([BAR](#) 31:05, Sep/Oct 2005)

[“Place of the Beautiful Ones”](#) ([AO](#) 8:02, Mar/Apr 2005)

[Marisa Tomb Paintings](#) ([BAR](#) 30:02, Mar/Apr 2004)

[Peter in Rome](#) ([BR](#) 20:01, Feb 2004)

[Jots & Tittles](#) ([BR](#) 20:01, Feb 2004)

[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 29:06, Nov/Dec 2003)

[The Mystery of Theoderic’s Tomb Solved!](#) ([AO](#) 6:06, Nov/Dec 2003)

[Jots & Tittles](#) ([BR](#) 19:05, Oct 2003)

[“Look on My Works”](#) ([AO](#) 6:05, Sep/Oct 2003)

[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 6:05, Sep/Oct 2003)

[Treasures in the Storeroom](#) ([BAR](#) 29:04, Jul/Aug 2003)

[Death at Kourion](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)

[Past Perfect: In Defense of the Realm](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)

[Ancient Life: Childhood’s End](#) ([AO](#) 6:04, Jul/Aug 2003)

[Where Was James Buried?](#) ([BR](#) 19:03, Jun 2003)

[Tomb of James Relocated—Miraculously!](#) ([BR](#) 19:03, Jun 2003)

[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 29:03, May/June 2003)

[Warriors, Wolves, and Women](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)

[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:03, May/June 2003)

[The Bones of Qumran](#) ([BAR](#) 29:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[Villages of Stone](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 6:02, Mar/Apr 2003)

[Whose Bones](#) ([BAR](#) 29:01, Jan/Feb 2003)

[The Guardians of Tamassos](#) ([AO](#) 5:06, Nov/Dec 2002)

[Book Review: Cyprus’ Jewel by the Sea](#) ([AO](#) 5:05, Sep/Oct 2002)

[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)

[Past Perfect: King Tut, I Presume?](#) ([AO](#) 5:04, Jul/Aug 2002)

[The Shaft Tombs of Abusir](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/June 2002)

[Crossing into the Afterlife](#) ([AO](#) 5:03, May/June 2002)
[Past Perfect: Into the Afterlife](#) ([AO](#) 5:02, Mar/Apr 2002)
[Nawamis of Sinai](#) ([AO](#) 5:01, Jan/Feb 2002)
[Italy's Top Antiquities Cops Fight Back](#) ([AO](#) 5:01, Jan/Feb 2002)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 27:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[The Death of Midas: An Eternal Feast](#) ([AO](#) 4:06, Nov/Dec 2001)
[Why Bone Boxes?](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[The Tomb of Caiaphas](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:05, Sep/Oct 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:04, Jul/Aug 2001)
[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 17:03, Jun 2001)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:03, May/June 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[Briefly Noted](#) ([AO](#) 4:03, May/June 2001)
[ReViews](#) ([BAR](#) 27:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 27:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Destinations: City of the Dead](#) ([AO](#) 4:02, Mar/Apr 2001)
[Earliest Christian Inscription](#) ([BR](#) 17:01, Feb 2001)
[The Last Words of Avercius](#) ([BR](#) 17:01, Feb 2001)
[Holy Targets: Joseph's Tomb Is Just the Latest](#) ([BAR](#) 27:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 4:01, Jan/Feb 2001)
[The Church of the Holy Sepulchre \(in Bologna, Italy\)](#) ([BAR](#) 26:06, Nov/Dec 2000)
[Iconoclasm](#) ([BR](#) 16:05, Oct 2000)
[The Necropolis at Beth She'arim](#) ([BR](#) 16:05, Oct 2000)
[Mummies](#) ([AO](#) 3:05, Sep/Oct 2000)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 3:03, May/June 2000)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 26:01, Jan/Feb 2000)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:05, Nov/Dec 1999)
[Did a Rolling Stone Close Jesus' Tomb?](#) ([BAR](#) 25:05, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Who Lies Here?](#) ([BAR](#) 25:05, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Field Notes](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Reviews](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 2:04, Sep/Oct 1999)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 25:04, Jul/Aug 1999)
[Destinations: The Valley of the Tombs, Palmyra, Syria](#) ([AO](#) 2:03, Jul/Aug 1999)
[The Great MFA Exposé](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Who Really Built the Pyramids?](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Ancient Life: Tut-tut!](#) ([AO](#) 2:02, May/June 1999)
[Odd Tomb Out](#) ([BAR](#) 25:02, Mar/Apr 1999)
[Readers Reply](#) ([BR](#) 15:01, Feb 1999)
[Pharaoh's Workers: How the Israelites Lived in Egypt](#) ([BAR](#) 25:01, Jan/Feb 1999)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 25:01, Jan/Feb 1999)
[Dining in Heaven](#) ([BR](#) 14:05, Oct 1998)
[Cultural Crossroads](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)
[First Person: Israel's Archaeological Crisis](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:05, Sep/Oct 1998)
[Death in Peqi'in](#) ([AO](#) 1:04, Fall 1998)
[Jots & Tittles](#) ([BR](#) 14:04, Aug 1998)
[Discovering the Blue Demon's Tomb](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)

[How the Etruscans Influenced Western Art](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[Grape Pips, Dog Bones and Acorn Missiles](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:03, Summer 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:03, May/Jun 1998)
[Architecture of the Afterlife](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Complete Pyramids](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[The Forum](#) ([AO](#) 1:02, Spring 1998)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 24:02, Mar/Apr 1998)
[Invoking the Spirit](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[Past Perfect: Into the Etruscan Depths](#) ([AO](#) 1:01, Winter 1998)
[Politics—Not Religious Law—Rules Ultra-Orthodox Demonstrators](#) ([BAR](#) 23:06, Nov/Dec 1997)
[Strata](#) ([BAR](#) 23:04, Jul/Aug 1997)
[Underground Metropolis: The Subterranean World of Maresha](#) ([BAR](#) 23:02, Mar/Apr 1997)
[PreViews](#) ([BAR](#) 23:02, Mar/Apr 1997)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 22:04, Jul/Aug 1996)
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[WorldWide](#) ([BAR](#) 21:05, Sep/Oct 1995)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 21:02, Mar/Apr 1995)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 20:01, Jan/Feb 1994)
[Even Briefer](#) ([BAR](#) 19:06, Nov/Dec 1993)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:02, Mar/Apr 1993)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 19:01, Jan/Feb 1993)
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[Caiaphas Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes](#) ([BAR](#) 18:05, Sep/Oct 1992)
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[Mystery Circles](#) ([BAR](#) 18:04, Jul/Aug 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 18:03, May/Jun 1992)
[Books in Brief](#) ([BAR](#) 18:01, Jan/Feb 1992)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:02, Mar/Apr 1990)
[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 16:01, Jan/Feb 1990)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 13:02, Mar/Apr 1987)
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[Queries & Comments](#) ([BAR](#) 12:06, Nov/Dec 1986)
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[Exploring the Deep](#) ([AO](#) 6:01, Jan/Feb 2003)
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[Queries & Comments](#) (**BAR** 17:06, Nov/Dec 1991)
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