

SISERA AND HAROSHETH-GOIM

GABRIEL A. SIVAN

The Israelites again did what was offensive to the Lord, Ehud now being dead. And the Lord surrendered them to Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Now the commander of his army was Sisera, whose base was in Harosheth-goim. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord; for he [Sisera] had nine hundred iron chariots and he had oppressed Israel ruthlessly for twenty years . . . (Judg. 4:1-3)

These three verses are the prelude to one of the most dramatic stories in the Tanakh. They take us back to "an early period in Israel's history, the days after the death of Joshua, when the tribes were compelled to wage a hard and often desperate struggle against the remaining warlike Canaanites . . . a barbaric period, without national unity and devoid of religious authority."¹ There is also, of course, an emphatic parallel between this story of deliverance from Jabin and Sisera (Judg. 4-5) and the story of Israel's deliverance from the Egyptian pharaoh (Ex. 14-15). A memorable song of praise and triumph celebrates both victories; and the episode related in Judges is the appointed *haf-tarah* (prophetical reading) for the one recorded in Exodus.

My aim here is not to discuss the leadership role of Deborah, the military tactics adopted by Barak, the character of Yael and other such themes.² Instead, I propose to clarify what is known about the enigmatic Sisera, his name and likely origin, and to show how the real significance of "Harosheth-goim" (properly Haroshet ha-Goyyim) has been overlooked.

IDENTIFYING SISERA

The mystery of Sisera's origin is largely bound up with the origin of his name. The great Jewish Bible commentators – Rashi, Kimḥi and Ralbag (Levi ben Gershom) – have nothing to say about this, and only fanciful explanations were offered by scholars up to the twentieth century. In the English-

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language version of his *Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament*, for example, Gesenius interpreted the name to mean "a field of battle", suggesting a link with the Syriac root *sur*, "to leap forward, make an onset." Even more far-fetched was the notion that "Sisera" might be a combination of two Hebrew words, the noun *sis* ("a swallow") and the verb *ra'ah* ("see"), thus producing an echo of Fenimore Cooper in "Hawkeye"! *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (1897) ventured beyond the Semitic languages, attempting to derive "Sisera" from ancient Egyptian with *Ses-Ra* ("servant of Ra"). More recently, even the (Hebrew) *Biblical Encyclopedia* saw fit to mention a theory that the name was an abbreviation of *Siser-baal* or *Siser-el* – before admitting that no such deity can be found in the Near Eastern pantheon.³

It is generally agreed today that Sisera's name is definitely non-Semitic, neither Hebrew nor Canaanite, and that it may well have belonged to one of the "Sea Peoples", e.g., the Tjeker and the Shardana (Sherden), who together with the Peleset or Pelishtim (Philistines) invaded the coastal regions of Canaan before the twelfth century BCE.⁴ Jeffrey S. Rogers thinks it likely that Sisera "was a leader of a branch of the Sea Peoples, a term denoting several groups of immigrants to Palestine who came from various places in the Mediterranean basin (e.g., Sardinia, Asia Minor, Cyprus) beginning as early as the fifteenth century BCE and culminating around 1200 BCE."⁵

On the basis of recent archaeological finds, Professor Adam Zertal of Haifa University maintains that Sisera belonged to the Shardana "Sea People" whose original home was the island of Sardinia. Zertal argues, rather plausibly, that Sisera's name, which has not been found at ancient sites in the Middle East, may derive from Sassari (now the capital of a province in north-western Sardinia); that his family could have originated there; places called "Sis-", "Si-" and "Sa-" are located throughout the island.⁶

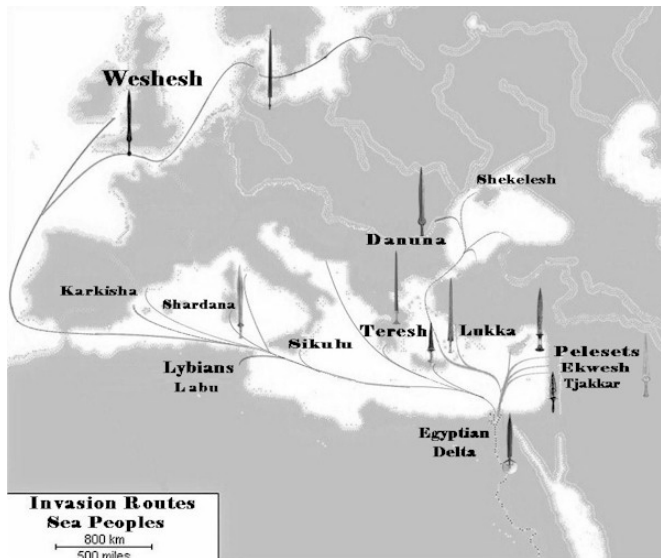
THE SHARDANA IN HISTORY

If Sisera was indeed a member of the Shardana (Sherden), what do historical records tell us about this ethnic group?

Of all the "Sea Peoples", according to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, only the Philistines and the Tjeker can be positively identified. The identity of the rest (Shekelesh, Denyen, Sherden, Weshesh and others) is still a matter for conjecture. Displaced from their original homelands, they "assimilated the Mino-

an-Mycenaean culture patterns of the Aegean world."⁷ Though often dismissed as raiders and pirates, the Sea Peoples evidently formed part of a great migration (an early *Völkerwanderung*; see map) that resulted from widespread crop failures and famine. After causing havoc in Mycenaean Greece, they reached the Nile Delta and attacked Egypt, first in the days of Rameses II (1278 BCE) and then during the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah, who slaughtered thousands of them in a six-hour battle (c. 1208 BCE). That victory, recorded on the walls of the temple of Amun at Karnak, did not halt their depredations, since these invaders later destroyed the Hittite empire. They then launched another attack on Egypt, by sea and land, which was overwhelmed by the troops of Rameses III (c. 1175 BCE), as depicted on the outer walls of the temple at Medinet Habu.⁸

The precise origin of the Shardana is un-

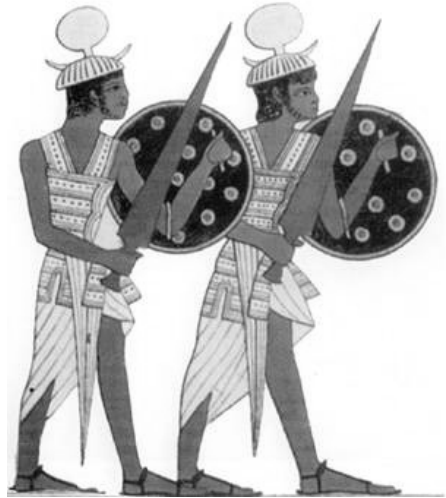


certain: they may have come from Sardis in Anatolia, from the Aegean islands or even (as Zertal claims) by way of Sardinia. Unlike their Philistine allies, the Shardana had "Semitic" features and their males were circumcised, which casts doubt on the belief that their ancestry was Sardinian. Nevertheless, one fact is clear: the Shardana (*Srdn-w*) were among the very first of the "Sea Peoples" to appear in historical records. As warriors for hire, they are mentioned in the *Tel El-Amarna Letters* addressed to Pharaoh Akhenaton (c. 1350 BCE). Subsequently, they played a varied role in Egyptian history – defeated by Rameses II in a sea battle off the Mediterranean coast, recruited for service in his personal guard, joining a "Sea Peoples" coalition against

Merneptah, assisting the Egyptian garrison at Beth Shean in Canaan and fighting alongside the Peleset (Philistines) in the days of Rameses III.

Egyptian monuments, notably the Medinet Habu "sea battle" reliefs, portray them dressed in a cuirass of overlapping metal or leather bands, wearing a horned helmet (often with a spiked disk on top), carrying a round shield and brandishing a long rapier-like sword (see illustration).⁹ The horned Sherden helmet, of which there were many types,¹⁰ is easily distinguishable from the feather-topped helmet of the Philistines.

In the *Onomasticon of Amenemope*, a papyrus text dating from the end of the Ramesside period (1300-1075 BCE),¹¹ the Shardana are listed among the "Sea Peoples" occupying the coastal region of Phoenicia, which then extended as far south as present-day Haifa. This lends support to the idea that Sisera and at least part of his army were Shardana colonists, rather than mercenaries, and that a grim conflict over territory¹² pitted them against the Israelites.



LOCATING "HAROSHETH-GOIM"

According to Rashi, Haroshet ha-Goyyim was so named "because it was a strong and dominating city." Ralbag develops this interpretation, claiming that "many nations" erected it as a defense against the Israelites; but he also suggests that it was built in a forest, associating Haroshet with the term hurshah ("woodland") – a view that some modern scholars have referred to or adopted.¹³ Most authorities, whether archaeologists or Bible scholars, have tried to identify Haroshet ha-Goyyim, Sisera's cavalry base, with a particular location in the Mount Carmel region. Some of their proposals are vague, alluding to "Muhrashti of the Amarna Letters – which is to be sought somewhere in the Plain of Sharon" or "a town located in the eastern end of the Acco plain, not far from Yoqneam."¹⁴ Others are more specific: Avi-Yonah mentions two possible sites: Khirbat al- Harbaj or Tel al-'Amar near al-

Harithiyya,¹⁵ while the *Da'at Mikra* commentary also points to Tel al-'Amar, "(now called Tel Geva Shemen), which is near Hartiyyeh (present-day Sha'ar ha-Amakim), in the pass between the valleys of Jezreel and Zevulun."¹⁶ The name given to Kiryat Haroshet, on the southern edge of Kiryat Tiv'on, would therefore recall this ancient site.

It is my contention that most Bible scholars and archaeologists have overlooked the real significance of "Haroshet". According to the Bible (Judg. 4:3), Sisera had nine hundred iron chariots at his disposal and this powerful force, equivalent to a modern tank army, was stationed at Harosheth-goim. Yet "Woodland of the Gentiles" (associating *haroshet* with *hurshah*) is not the only or the most logical translation of that place name. An early clue was provided by Ralbag in his commentary: "Haroshet ha-Goyyim received that designation because it was built through the work of many nations (*bimelekheth goyyim rabbim*)."¹⁷ Craftsmen working in bronze and iron are specifically mentioned by Ralbag.¹⁷ The term *harash*, which stems from the root *h-r-sh*, means "artisan" or "craftsman", and it occurs several times in the Bible.¹⁸ Three related terms are *horesh nehoshet* "a worker in brass", (I Kgs. 7:14), *mahareshah* "a plough", (I Sam. 13:20) and – last but not least – *haroshet* "cutting" or "carving", (Ex. 31:5).¹⁹ In Modern Hebrew, *haroshet* signifies "manufacture" while *beit haroshet* denotes a factory or industrial plant. It stands to reason, therefore, that Haroshet ha-Goyyim was so named because iron or iron-plated chariots were assembled there by skilled "craftsmen" (i.e., metalworkers).²⁰

The forces commanded by Sisera are said to have had 900 chariots of iron at their disposal, recalling the number of Canaanite chariots (924) captured by the army of Pharaoh Thutmose III after the battle of Megiddo in 1468 BCE. Even if this tally is dismissed as an exaggeration and reduced to one tenth of the number quoted, an armored corps of some 90 chariots would have made Sisera's host overwhelmingly superior to the Israelite militias.²¹ Facing such an array, the militias under Barak's command around 1125 BCE were at an obvious disadvantage in the Emek (Valley of Jezreel) because they had neither supplies of iron nor the skill required to fashion weapons of war from that metal. As we know from the Bible, a monopoly of the iron industry was exercised by the Philistines down to the era of King Saul (I Sam. 13:19-22).²² The defeat of Sisera's chariot army, after a downpour that he never

anticipated, was therefore attributed to the generalship of Deborah and Barak – and to Divine intervention.

Was Sisera the chief opponent of Israel throughout this campaign? From the biblical text it appears that *Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor* gave the orders and that Sisera, *the captain of his host*, obeyed them (Judg. 4:2-3). According to the Bible, however, *Jabin king of Hazor*, the head of an earlier hostile coalition, had been slain by Joshua's troops (Josh. 11:10-11), who also slew the petty kings of Taanach, Megiddo, Jokneam, Dor and other towns (Josh. 12:21-23). How does one explain these contradictory statements? A number of solutions²³ have been proposed: (1) that the Canaanites subsequently recaptured Hazor and installed a descendant of Jabin as their ruler; (2) that "Jabin" (Yavin) was simply a generic title in Canaan, like "Pharaoh" in Egypt; or (3) that after the destruction of Hazor, surviving members of Jabin's family escaped to Harosheth-Goim, where they founded a new dynasty.²⁴

However, since there is not a single reference to Jabin in the triumphant Song of Deborah (Judges 5), I am inclined to believe that Sisera was the real head of the enemy coalition and that the role ascribed to him as commander of Jabin's army was a later tradition.

ZERTAL'S HYPOTHESIS

El-Ahwat ("walls" or "enclosures" in Arabic) is the name of a place located between Katzir and Nahal Iron (Wadi Ara) in northwestern Samaria. During the years 1993-2000, it was excavated by a team of archaeologists from the University of Haifa and the University of Cagliari in Sardinia. Headed by Professor Adam Zertal, these archaeologists discovered the remains of a "city" dating from the Early Iron Age (1250-1000 BCE) which displayed some unique features.²⁵ Though relatively small (covering just 7.5 acres), it had fortifications, an unusually wide exterior wall, passageways through the walls and round structures within that bore no resemblance to anything previously found in Canaanite cities of the same period (e.g., Hazor and Megiddo). The excavators unearthed nine Egyptian scarabs (one bearing the name of Pharaoh Rameses III), a furnace for smelting iron ore and other artifacts. It is most unlikely that the inhabitants were Israelites because their diet included wild boar as well as fish (Nile perch) caught locally. What also mystified

the archaeologists was the purpose and function of a settlement that only existed for 50 years, after which it was abandoned. Its buildings must have housed a small population, conceivably a garrison, and the four quarters into which it was divided might have been reserved for livestock – or for chariots.

While the El-Ahwat site was being excavated in September 1995, Zertal made a tour of Sardinia, where the Nuragic civilization had flourished between the eighteenth century BCE and the second century CE. Its chief monument, the *Nuraghe* (meaning "a heap of stones" in the ancient Sardinian language), is a truncated beehive-shaped tower made of huge stone blocks; another type of *Nuraghe* has a system of corridors. Over 8,000 of these Bronze Age structures are located in various parts of the island and they may have housed a family or an army unit. Zertal found a striking resemblance not only between the architecture of the *Nuraghe* and that of the El-Ahwat structures but also in the designs ornamenting their pottery. A subsequent visit to Corsica in July 2004 led him to detect similar building methods at El-Ahwat and in remains of that island's Turanic culture dating from the second millennium BCE.

Zertal's belief that the Shardana constituted a link between Sardinia and El-Ahwat has been strengthened by a more recent discovery. A 3,200-year-old round bronze tablet with the carved face of a woman, unearthed at the excavation site in 1997, is no longer a mystery: Oren Cohen, one of Adam Zertal's Haifa University colleagues, identified this artifact as part of a linchpin that held the wheel of an Egyptian or Canaanite battle chariot in place. "This identification enhances the historical and archaeological value of the [El-Ahwat] site," Zertal affirms, "and it proves that chariots belonging to high-ranking individuals were found there. It lends support to the theory, not yet conclusive, that this was Sisera's home town [i.e., Haroshet ha-Goyyim] and that it was from here that the chariots set out on their way to the battle against the Israelite tribes, which was located between the ancient sites of Taanach and Megiddo."²⁶

NOTES

1. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, second edition (London: Soncino Press, 1967) p. 281.
2. A few articles published years ago in this journal are nevertheless relevant: "Three Charismatic Judges and their Strategies" by Aran Ron, *Dor le Dor* 4:1 (Fall 1975) pp. 8-12; "The Orig-

inal Palestinians" by Stuart A. West, *Dor le Dor* 10:4 (Summer 1982) p. 243 ff.; and "Deborah, the Wife of Lapidot" by Haim Gevaryahu, *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 18:3 (Spring 1990) pp. 135-40.

3. *Entziklopediyah Mikra'it*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1968) cols. 1033-4.

4. For this consensus of opinion, see Judah J. Slotki in *Soncino Books of the Bible: Judges* (London: Soncino Press, 1950) p. 185; *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972; hereafter *EJ*) 14:1621-2, which states that "the best linguistic affinities are found in Illyrian names with the element *-ero*"; *The Anchor Bible: Judges* (New York, 1975) p. 94; *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985) s.v. Sisera; Richard A. Gabriel, *The Military History of Ancient Israel* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) pp. 177-8; and *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, GA: 1998) p. 830.

5. *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, loc. cit.

6. For details, see "Greetings from Sardinia", a feature article (Hebrew) by Ze'ev Ehrlich in the weekly supplement of *Makor Rishon*, January 18, 2008, pp. 2-3; and a report by Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, in *The Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2010, p. 7. Zertal's archaeological finds and his hypothesis regarding Haroshet ha-Goyyim (discussed below) are set forth in his recent book, *Sodo shel Sisera: Massa be-ikvot Goyyei ha-Yam ve-Shirat Devorah* ["Sisera's Secret: A Journey following the Sea Peoples and the Song of Deborah"] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2010).

7. *EJ* 13:399.

8. A detailed (Wikipedia) review of the "Sea Peoples", with extensive footnotes and a bibliography, is available on the Internet.

9. Interestingly enough, this type of long sword (made of copper with a small admixture of arsenic) was not confined to the Near East. About thirty similar weapons, dating from around 1600 BCE, have been retrieved from a burial cave in Sardinia. The fact that Middle Bronze Age statuettes of horn-helmeted warriors have also been discovered there only heightens speculation about the Shardana people's origin.

10. Shardana helmets depicted on reliefs at Luxor, Abu Simbel and Medinet Habu (c. 1300-1100 BCE) seem to have had two horns only when they were fighting the Egyptians. The central ball or disk was apparently added after their defeat, or when they were recruited by Pharaoh's army (which suggests a connection with Re [Ra], the Egyptian sun god).

11. It was during this period that Israel became a unified nation. On the document itself, see Alan H. Gardner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

12. See Adam Zertal, "The 'Corridor-builders' of Central Israel: Evidence for the Settlement of the 'Northern Sea Peoples'?", in *Defensive Settlements of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean after c. 1200 BC*, ed. V. Karageorghis and C. E. Morris (Dublin: The Anastasios G. Leventis Foundation, 2001) pp. 215-232.

13. They include Binyamin Mazar, who argued that Harosheth-Goiim was "not the name of a city but a general term designating the forested regions of central Galilee (cf. *Gelil ha-goyim*, 'Galilee of the nations,' Isa. 8:23), over which Sisera attempted to impose his rule" (quoted by Michael Avi-Yonah in the *EJ* 7:1347 entry).

14. *The Anchor Bible and Harper's Bible Dictionary*; R. A. Gabriel, *ibid*.

15. *EJ* 7:1347. See also the "Sisera" entry (*EJ* 14:1621-2), where Robert G. Boling writes: "A location for Harosheth-Goiim has been suggested in the vicinity of Hazor [i.e., Jabin's capital to the far north east]. However, with the evidence for the historicity of Judges 4, the site of Tell-

'Amr, at the southern edge of the Esdraelon plain near the mouth of the pass into the plain of Acre, remains the most probable location of Sisera's town. The tradition that calls it Harosheth 'of the Gentiles,' plus Sisera's non-Semitic name, combines with the fact that Tel-'Amr was founded in the early Iron Age to suggest that it belonged to one of the recently arrived Sea Peoples." Judah Slotki, on p. 186 of his commentary on Judges (see note 4 above), is mistaken about the historical geography, since he declares that Haroshet ha-Goyyim "has been sought either at el-Harithiyeh on the north side of the Kishon, not far from Megiddo (Thatcher), or at el-Harbaj, a mound on a small tributary, three miles away (Garstang)."

16. *Da'at Mikra: Shofetim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976) pp. 48 and 55 (map).

17. Slotki quotes this explanation in his own commentary: "The city was built by the craftsmanship (root *charash*) of many nations so as to be an impregnable fortress."

18. See Johannes Buxtorf the Elder's *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* (Basle, 1607). In my copy of the London (1646) edition, pp. 254-5, one example quoted from Isaiah 44:12 is *harash barzel* (blacksmith): "חריש ברזל, Faber ferri, id est, ferrarius..."

19. Buxtorf, *ibid.*, also records *haroshet* as a place name in Judges 4:3.

20. While preparing this essay, I discovered that Wikipedia's "Harosheth Haggoyim" article, newly modified on November 21, 2010, translates the name of Sisera's fortress as "Smithy of the Nations."

21. See Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Discovery* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963) p. 255; Chaim Herzog and Mordechai Gichon, *Battles of the Bible*, second edition (London: Greenhill Books, 1997) p. 67; and R. A. Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

22. A. Ron in *Dor le Dor*, 4:1 (1975) p. 10. Conceivably, as a "Sea People", the Shardana also brought skilled ironworkers to Canaan.

23. See, for example, *EJ* 7:1535 (on Hazor) and 9:1173-4 (on Jabin).

24. Commentary of Radak (Kimhi) on Judges 4:2.

25. For the source of the following data, see below.

26. "Archaeological Mystery Solved," University of Haifa press release, July 1, 2010. This was the source of an article published a day later in *The Jerusalem Post* (see note 6 above); but Ze'ev Ehrlich's feature article in *Makor Rishon* was clearly based on an interview or more extensive material.



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