



CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
OUR LADY OF GOOD COUNSEL

JOURNAL OF LIFE SCIENCES AND SOCIETY
EVOLUTION

2021 VOL. 1

EVOLUTION

JOURNAL OF LIFE SCIENCES AND SOCIETY

ISSN 2708-6771 (Print)

**Official Publication of the Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel”
Copyright ©: Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel”**

**Faculty of Applied Sciences
Vol I, Issue 2, May 2021**

EDITORIAL BOARD

Bruno GIARDINA
Giuseppe DE LUCA
Giovanni ARCUDI
Marcello LEOPOLDO
Vittorio TEOTONICO

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Faculty of Applied Sciences

Fabio CAPANNI
Riccardo BUTINI
Alessandro MERLO

Faculty of Economic, Political and Social Sciences

Vittorio TEOTONICO
Giovanni LAGIOIA
Vito PINTO
Vittorio DELL'ATTI
Klodian MUÇO

Faculty of Medicine

Cartesio FAVALLI
Francesco RULLI
Guido VIRGILI

Faculty of Pharmacy

Bruno ZAPPACOSTA
Nunzio DENORA
Marcello LEOPOLDO
Antonio SCILIMATI

ARCHITECTURAL SHAPE AND CULTURE OF THE ASHKELON ANCIENT CITY

~

FORMA E CULTURA ARCHITETTONICA DELL'ANTICA CITTÀ DI ASHKELON

Cecilia Maria Roberta LUSCHI, Beatrice STEFANINI, Alessandra VEZZI

DIDA, Department of Architecture, University of Florence, (Italy)

e-mail: cecilia.luschi@unifi.it, beatrice.stefanini@unifi.it, alessandra.vezzi@unifi.it

Abstract

The Mediterranean Sea is one of the ancient cornerstones of the Earth. Different peoples met and clashed in the Mediterranean area, leading to the birth of a culture that marks its distinction in the choral dimension. Manifestation of civilization is architecture in its different scales. The city, therefore, is a synthesis of many units that are recognized in a common structural and cultural denominator. Traces of certain dynamics can be found in the city of Ashkelon, on the south-east coast of the Mediterranean.

The path presented proposes a reading of the urban layout of ancient Ashkelon in order to obtain those cultural traits of Mediterranean matrix, putting it in relation with the other urban realities of the basin.

The dialogue that different peoples, at different times, but inhabitants of the same place, have managed to weave in the mutual recognition of belonging to the same culture, the Mediterranean one, is made up in an overall picture.

Il Mar Mediterraneo si pone tra gli antichi capisaldi della Terra. Popoli diversi si sono incontrati e scontrati nell'intorno mediterraneo, portando alla nascita di una cultura che marca la sua distinzione nella dimensione corale. Manifestazione di civiltà è l'architettura nelle sue diverse scale. La città, perciò, si fa sintesi di tante unità che si riconoscono in un comune denominatore strutturale e culturale. Tracce di certe dinamiche si riscontrano, nella città di Ashkelon, nella costa sud-est del Mediterraneo. Il percorso presentato propone la lettura dell'assetto urbano dell'antica Ashkelon per ricavare quei tratti culturali di matrice mediterranea, ponendola in rapporto con le altre realtà urbane del bacino, arrivando a ricomporre in un quadro d'insieme quel dialogo che popoli diversi, in tempi diversi, ma abitanti dello stesso luogo, sono riusciti ad intrecciare nel reciproco riconoscimento dell'appartenenza ad una medesima cultura, quella mediterranea.

Keywords: Ashkelon, Map of Madaba, Cesarea, Cardo-Decumano, Waterfront

Introduction

There are many points of view from which it is possible to observe the Mediterranean dimension; each of them gives back, in the specificity of its position, a different projection which however always proves to be insufficient to be able to recognize the reality of the Mediterranean. The geography, from the historical to the contemporary one - in spite of the transformations brought by the passage of time - shows us an internal sea, which in the annular circuit of its basin has joined the lands of three continents. Through the far open ends of its longitudinal axis has extended its limits towards the oceanic waters and the transoceanic regions of West and East (Fig.1). Anthropology tells us of a very flourishing "cradle of peoples", which, even if in the different customs, languages and traditions, have been able to recognize in this sea the value of centrality which is so clearly expressed by its name: mediterraneus, "in the middle of the lands". So, a void between full that has rooted its identity in its territorial limits, making them the threshold of a real cultural world. We can consider it, therefore, a wide-ranging polarity, which has been able to scan and orient terrestrial life around itself, and beyond.

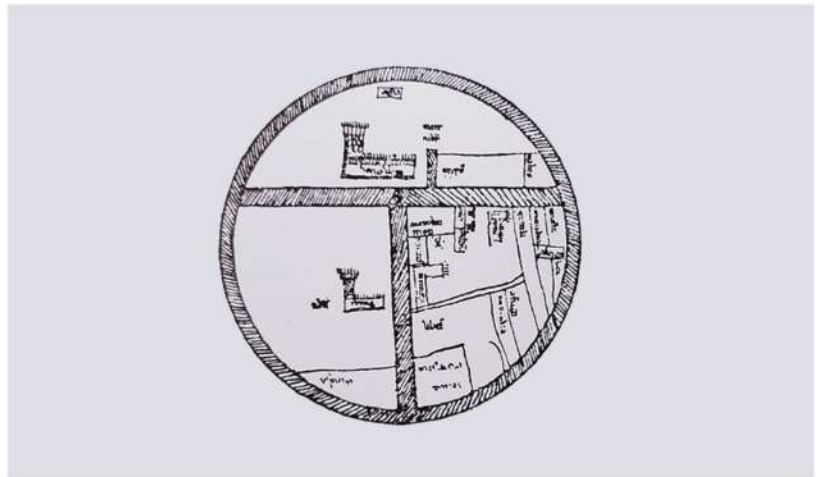


Figure 1

Globe with T-O scheme, taken from a Sallustian codex dating back to the XII century

Are posed those conditions that have led man, from being an inhabitant of spaces, to a citizen of places and bearer of civilisation. Eloquent and always valid, is the expression which the Greek geographer Strabo, in the first century B.C., uses in his treatise *Γεωγραφικά*, precisely the Mediterranean: *<From this point of view "our sea" possesses a great superiority and it is therefore by following it that we will begin the tour of the world>* [1]. Inevitable, moreover, is the reference to Portulans and manuscript nautical charts, witnesses of navigational experiences [2] and of the woven network of maritime routes along which, for centuries, both the merchant and military fleets of the coastal populations have sailed. They constantly strived to conquer that supremacy over the waters which, alone, would have assured them control of power in the surrounding regions. The important strategic value that the Mediterranean has always assumed, thanks also to its geographical and climatic location, has given it a degree of authority that has never failed, not even when the borders of the world expanded beyond the Pillars of Hercules, shifting the attention of men towards the Atlantic space [3].

In such a complex place there could only be an equally articulated culture, whose originality consists of a semantic stratification, neither reducible nor classifiable according to defined categories. The undisputed author of such a work was undoubtedly the plurality of peoples and civilisations, who crossed, contaminated and succeeded one another, collecting and nourishing the legacy left by the previous ones, by virtue of the recognition of a common denominator that included them all.

The attractive and unifying force of such a cultural identity - despite its subtle boundaries - has represented in the past, as it continues to do in the present, that one true continuous line capable of outlining the features of a single face with a thousand expressions. As a source of this, the future life of the Mediterranean environment cannot be thought of without taking into account this core full of founding meanings, source and vector of growth [4].

In this panorama, it proves inevitable to consider architecture, and in particular public architecture on an urban scale, the product of man's need to give space and form to all those aspects that coordinate his experience, from social, economic and political to cultural and cultural. Within the relationship between Mediterranean culture and the Mediterranean city, in the dynamics of exchange between these two realities, the coastal settlements, the so-called port cities, have played and undoubtedly play a first order role. Compared to the inland cities, because of their border position, these have experienced phenomena of exchange and colonization, which, in turn, have acted on their conformation, bringing rapid transformations, substitution and overlapping of the built space [5]. Moreover, the crossing of land borders has made these realities supporters of the triggering of a radiation dynamic that has projected and spread the seeds of the collected characters towards the continental areas.

The observations described in this contribution, part of a wider research on the urban and architectural history of the ancient city of Ashkelon, located on the Levantine coast between Jerusalem and Gaza. They pursue the intention of bringing out the characteristics of Mediterranean culture, using the urban compositional structure of the Israeli city mentioned above as an instrument of investigation. The outlines of these factors will then allow a direct comparison with other situations, related to it for historical and political geographical reasons, so as to show the concrete connective and ordering capacity that the Mediterranean Sea has had towards those lands of which it is the centre.

Ascalona

Ashkelon is a Mediterranean coastal city in the southern district of Israel, 50 km south of Tel Aviv and 13 km north of Gaza. Its name refers to the root of the word "shekel" [6], which indicates the unit of weight, the official Israeli currency both ancient and modern, in reference to its great importance as a port centre for merchant activities in the past. Moreover, the same word, identifies a variety of "allium", the shallot cultivated in those lands and exported throughout the Mediterranean in many cities of the Roman Empire [7].

Ashkelon, historically founded by the Canaanites in the 20th century B.C., then ruled by the Egyptians in the 14th century BC, developed with the Philistines (9th century B.C.) in biblical times its importance as a port city. It was followed by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BC. He was succeeded by the Maccabees, the Hasmoneans and then the Romans in the 1st century B.C. who built the Roman walls on the Canarian terraces. During the Byzantine period (4th-7th centuries A.D.), in addition to the conversion to Christianity, the prosperity of Ashkelon, which became an important centre for the grain trade and the export of wine, culminated. Later, we have the Arabic period (7th-12th century AD) where the city was completely destroyed and then rebuilt and fortified, becoming Muslim. The Crusader period followed to liberate the Holy Land, when the southern border of the Latin Kingdom was established. In 1187 Salah al-Din (Saladin) defeated the Crusaders and conquered the strongholds. In 1191 his army was defeated at the battle of Arsuf (Apollonia) by Richard the Lionheart, but Saladin still managed to demolish the fortifications of Ashkelon before the Crusaders entered the city. In 1240 it was again fortified by Richard I of Cornwall, but in 1270 the Muslim forces led by Sultan Bybars conquered and destroyed the port city for good [8].



Figure 2

Map of the ancient city of Ashkelon in historical succession in the reading on which scholars converge today

The ruins of the cities were then brought to light during the Ottoman period (XVI-XX century A.D.) thanks to the archaeological mission of Lady Hester Stanhope in 1815. The site was then examined by Palestine by the Exploration Fund (PEF) of Conder and Kitchener during the British Survey of Western Palestine in 1874-75, leading to a reference cartography. In fact, from the second half of the 20th century, thanks to the increasing use of topographic maps, sources of study of historical geography, Palestine became the object of archaeological surveys and excavations. Thus, the first scientific excavation in Ashkelon was conducted by archaeologist John Garstang and his assistant W. J. Phythian Adams of the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1920-1922. An underwater investigation by the Center for Maritime Studies of the University of Haifa (1985-87), the expeditions of the IAA (Israel Antiquities Authority), which conducted underwater and coastal studies (1992-97) and those of Leon Levy (1985 - 2006). One of the main objectives was to be able to determine the position of the ancient port - historically attested, but not found during the excavation campaigns carried out - and to be able to understand the changes in the settlement patterns of the peoples who inhabited that area [9].

In 1964 the archaeological park of Ashkelon was created under the National Park Authority to protect the findings of the ancient coastal city. Ascalona, today, is located on the coast in the form of a semicircle, whose diameter extends along the south bank, while the arch lies to the east. The territory, characterised by wells that at the time provided a large supply of fresh water, slopes down towards the sea. To the south it is covered with sand and morphologically higher able to block the dusty material carried by the wind blowing from the desert regions from the south-west.

The sea front, and its port, have always played an important role in history, although the exact location of the latter has not yet been defined. Its position may have changed over time. In the ancient south-west wall towards the sea is the presence of granite columns coming out horizontally from the sandy wall of the coast probably placed to reinforce the walls. The town is also surrounded

by a line of remains of fortified walls to the north, east and west. There are four gates in the wall circuit: the first of these, facing east, is called Porta Maggiore or Jerusalem Gate, because it faces the Holy City. The second is the Jaffa Gate facing north, towards the nearby city of the same name, the third to the south is the Gaza Gate, while the fourth, facing west, is presumed to be the Sea Gate, which is still under discussion today [10].

The Ashkelon site, therefore, is articulated in a complex way, identifying two main areas called North Tell and South Tell which represent a specific north-western and south-western area within which findings and excavations were made during archaeological expeditions, based on a grid of 100x100m units, useful to identify specific research areas. Inside we find the stratification of archaeological and architectural remains: some ruins of rooms facing west, in the centre the remains of the colonnaded structure of a Basilica, several wells and to the east, the Church called S. Maria Viridis and the Roman Theatre [9]. Currently, through the zenithal territorial views we can distinguish two road axes: one east-west and one north-south. The latter connects the Jaffa Gate with the Gaza Gate, probably referring to the road called "Via Maris", the ancient trade route that crossed the plain parallel to the coast of Palestine, connecting Alexandria with Damascus, passing through Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Joppa (Jaffa) and Dor.



Figure 3
Map of the Levant coast
(Itinera Hierosolimitana
Crucesignatorum I, XII-XIII
century) with the Via Maris
route highlighted in red

Investigation methods

Since talking about Mediterranean culture means talking about something elusive, where, often to the concrete data are added a series of immaterial factors, the use of only written sources, which historical, archaeological, and geographical literature provide, proves not to be exhaustive, if not even, in some cases, misleading. The complexity of the theme requires an analysis built on the ground of the comparison, starts from a reading of the urban fabric. Then descends to the level of the architectural layout, until it picks up signs recorded in the general unity of the genesis and evolution of the city organism. In this sense the research moves from the original matrices, which over time have followed one another, leading to the ultimate present image. Among all the historical matrices that are stratified in ancient Aschkelon. The attention has focused on that of the Roman period, that civilisation which, being characterised by its nature by a high degree of structuring, has managed to engrave traces from solid foundations, capable of resisting the action of both anthropic and natural events. In support of this choice, it is also good to remember that the Roman people are a founding people of cities, and a winning idea of cities, because they were ordered according to a system of open and closed spaces that made the urban fabric permeable to the different actions and needs, both private and public, of its inhabitants. Inevitably Rome, the great metropolis, imposed itself from the very beginning as the mother and matrix of this real culture of living and building. Its resonance force was such that it reached all the edges of the Mediterranean coasts with their port cities, which in turn were the proponents of an expansion of this influence also in the continental hinterland regions. *"The over 400 localities known to have been used as ports in Roman times"* [5] attest to the primacy of the Roman matrix in the size of the Mediterranean city and demonstrate the reasons for its structural resilience in later periods.

Discover Ascalona thanks to the Mediterranean matrix

Starting therefore from a reading of the urban fabric, we can see the similarity in the architectural layout of Ashkelon with that of the city of Caesarea (Israel), located further north, 42 km from Haifa. This theme, which probably did not go unnoticed by scholars, has not yet had the right consideration in the fact of being able to get a reading on how the waterfront was organised by the Roman people in the Middle Eastern area of the Mediterranean. Therefore, considering the studies carried out on Caesarea (Fig. 4) and those to be developed on Ashkelon (Fig. 5), it is evident the location of the corresponding elements in both cities, such as the presence of the double external fortification structure that organizes a sort of free area with a defensive role, which contains the most functional part of the city where the theatre, the stadium or the amphitheatre is located.

Figure 4

Map of the current archaeological evidence of ancient Caesarea. Note the orientation of the buildings of the Basilica and the minor Stadium, the layout of the double walls and the Crusader settlement.



Figure 5

Map of the current archaeological evidence of ancient Ashkelon where the possible double layout of the walls and the classical buildings of the Basilica and the Theatre are reported in analogy to Caesarea.



The layout of the double wall with moat is also found, in the Sanudo map, in the ancient port city of Akko (Israel), located further north of Caesarea. It is therefore possible to identify a constant in the structure of the fortification that follows a twin-track layout [11].

In this logic we can pose the first question and identify in Caesarea the location of public structures such as the Basilica and the area of the Forum which follow a very precise orientation, that is the cardo-decumano one. In Ashkelon, on the other hand, this arrangement seems to differ from the traces that are identified as the cardo-decumano, the latter being considered today as the stretch corresponding to the "via Maris". We further observe that a trade route so practiced cannot be suitable for the security and defence of a fortified city where goods entering and leaving were controlled by duty payments. Therefore, the first problem that is posed is the exact identification of the Via Maris, which is probably divided into two diverticules, one internal controlled and one external located in the hinterland adjacent to today's Ottoman quarter. The latter, in turn, is another aspect to be explored in relation to the findings of remains from the medieval Crusader period in that area which testify to the presence of a market or trade road passing outside the fortified city.

The second question, instead, is linked to the comparison of the representation of the city of Ascalona within the historical maps. For the Roman period reference is made to the Tabula Peutingeriana [12], while for the medieval period to the Map of Madaba [6]. The first, based on a Roman military road map of the 4th century AD with a north orientation on the right side, seems very eloquent as far as the organisation of the external road axes of Ashkelon is concerned. It is identified by a symbol made up of two towers with a double sloping roof crowned by a round apex, with long, narrow doors, separated from each other but linked by two pen strokes, one at the base and the other at roof height. The image gives a description of the city as a safe, fortified, station, identified with the representation of the two knightly towers next to the east gate. There is also an east-west road that arrives directly in front of the Jerusalem Gate (east) and two south and north axes that seem to be offset from each other. (Fig.6)

The Map of Madaba dating back to the 6th century A.D., since it is considered by archaeologists to be an extremely reliable representation of Jerusalem from the Hadrian period, with the thistle, the decumanus medium and the identification of the Damascus Gate, we consider the representation of Ashkelon, depicted from an aerial view overlooking the interior of the city itself, to be equally consistent. Slightly in a foreshortening position - perhaps to indicate the uphill slope towards the



Figure 6

Ascalona, Tabula Peutingeriana, Roman road map of the 4th century A.D. The relevant cartoon identifies a turreted wall and the streets to the north, south and east of the city of Ascalona with a view from outside the walls.

southern part of the area - is the turreted gate to the east, that of Jerusalem, from which the decumanus can be seen, which forks up to the waterfront, defining a trapezoidal area. The cardo instead stops at the height of the Basilica, interrupting the colonnaded part that continues westwards and identifying either a gap or the interruption of the same, as happens in Jerusalem. (Fig.7)

Figure 7

Overlapping of the location and orientation of the road axes of the Madaba map on the site of the current ancient Ashkelon. The main reference is given by the Gate of Jerusalem and the position of the Basilica found. Note how the mosaic offers a view of Ashkelon from the waterfront.

FRAMMENTO DEL MOSAICO DI MADABA



Conclusions

The analysis carried out on the Tabula Peuntingeriana and the Map of Madaba would give us a different interpretation regarding the morphology of the territory of Ashkelon, compared to how it appears today. If we therefore make an overlap between the zenithal aerial image of the present city and the representation of the same in the Map of Madaba, orienting them, we find that the cardo-decumano alignment of the historical map coincides as direction and position with the exact orientation of the Roman Basilica [13], then Byzantine Church. So, if the Basilica follows the cardo-decumano alignment, as in Caesar, the location of the axes currently identified may not be completely exact. The east-west axis forks until it intersects with the north-south axis, which interrupts the colonnaded part and continues southwards, reaching a gap or its own conclusion, and continues towards the sea front creating a trapezoidal space. In front of this trapezoidal area could be the access to the sea, since there is talk of the presence of a port still unidentified, which however seems to follow morphologically the forms of today's site. What has just been hypothesised will be further verified with in-depth studies of the sector both as regards the fronts, the differences in height, the definition of the resilience of the port settlement, and the orientations of the Roman cardo-decumano mesh, which was taken up by the Byzantines and later used and expanded by the Crusaders. (Fig. 8) All this leaves a trace on the territory, the Basilica becomes the architectural key of the city. This, therefore, is only the beginning of a wider research that will continue with the investigation of the successive temporal phases until the 19th century, the Ottoman era, focusing on the buildings that characterized the area examined. It turns out how Ashkelon can be organized thanks to the comparison of its structure with that of the Mediterranean cities [14] where there are local constants that are repeated in a logic of territorial analogy that together with the ancient cultural matrices are assimilated and then updated over time. The references to be investigated for the morphological and formal analogies will surely be Caesarea, as we said, and Leptis Magna (now Libya) another very

Figure 8

Territorial view of the new research layout where the so-called Via Maris could be depowered in favour of a thistle slid eastwards lying parallel to the remains of the Roman Basilica.



important Mediterranean city in the classical period. The research carried out must be the starting point to make these doubts and analogies, significant evidence, aiming at giving back a new vision, currently not unitary and not correct, of the ancient port city of Ascalona.

References

- [1] Strabone, Geografia II, 57.
- [2] Ferro G., Carte nautiche dal Medioevo all'Età Moderna, Edizioni Colombo, Genova 1992, p. 16.
- [3] Betti Carboncini A., Porti della Toscana: antichi approdi, marine, scali commerciali e industriali dal tempo degli etruschi ai giorni nostri, Calosci, Cortona 2002.
- [4] Malvasi F. (ed), Civiltà del Mare. La Grande Storia della Marineria Italiana, Progetto Editoriale Editions, Roma 2015, pp. 95-96.
- [5] Striga P., Porto vecchio – città storica. Appunti per una ricerca urbanistica nella dimensione mediterranea in città portuali del Mediterraneo: storia e archeologia, Atti del Convegno internazionale di Genova, Sagep Editrice, Genova 1985, pp. 309-310.
- [6] Stager E.L., SchLeon J.D., Master D.M., Ashkelon 1: Introduction and overview (1985–2006) - Final reports of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, Winona Lake, Indiana Eisenbrauns 2008.
- [7] Strabone, Geografia XVI, 2.
- [8] Sasson A., Historical Geography of The Palestine Southern Coastal Plain. In: The Late Ottoman Period. The Ashkelon Region as a case study, Middle Eastern Studies, 2019, 55: pp. 974-1004
- [9] Ciatti B., La Dominazione Egiziana nel Levante del Sud nel periodo del Tardo Bronzo - il caso di Ashkelon. Tesi di laurea, relatore: Prof. Pucci M, correlatore: Prof. Rosati G. Corso di Laurea Triennale in Storia e Tutela dei Beni Archeologi, Artistici, Archivistici e Librari – UNIFI, A.A. 2017-2018.
- [10] Pringles, R.D., The Survey of the walls of Ashkelon. In: Hoffman, Tracy Lynn (ed.), Ashkelon 8. The Islamic and Crusader Periods, The Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, vol. 8. University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, pp. 97-221.
- [11] Langè S., Architettura delle crociate in Palestina, Pietro Cairoli Editore, Como, 1965.
- [12] Levi A. e M., La “Tabula Peuntigeriana”, Edizioni Edison, Bologna, 1978.
- [13] Boehm R., Master D.M., Le Blanc R., The Basilica, Bouleuterion and civic center of Ashkelon, American Journal of Archaeology, pp. 271-300, 2016
- [14] Colletta T., Una Riflessione sul genius loci della città del Mediterraneo, Territorio della ricerca su insediamenti e ambiente, 8: 25-35, 2012.