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***The ancient practice of reuse.
From the Roman viridarium
to the medieval church in the old Ashkelon (Israel)***

Abstract

This study focuses on the architectural and functional analysis of the structure known as Santa Maria in Viridis, located at the highest point of the ancient city of Ascalona (Ashkelon, Israel), directly against the city walls and near the medieval Main Gate (Jerusalem Gate). Traditionally interpreted as a Byzantine church with a baptistery and subjected to modifications up to the medieval period, the building presents several architectural inconsistencies related to liturgical use.

The AskGate Mission (Italian Archaeological Mission – MAECI) conducted research and in-depth investigations employing an integrated, multiscale methodology to address the compositional issues that made the definition of the church space anomalous.

The architectural and compositional investigations revealed that the church was built over a pre-existing Roman *viridarium* featuring a complex water system and a *nymphaeum*, organised on at least two terraced levels resting upon a podium. The *viridarium* included an exedra equipped with a marble-lined basin that collected water and channelled it through a conduit into a basin at the centre of the courtyard.

What emerges from the architectural analysis and the examination of the decorative elements, such as the frescoes, is the substantial medieval phase during which the structure was reshaped as a church. This phase may correspond to the transformation of the site from a space defined by a pagan architectural language, characterised by an exedra, into one expressing a Christian language, marked by the presence of an apse.

Key words: Ashkelon, viridarium, mystagogy, historical architecture, cultural heritage

Introduction

The concept of architectural reuse became a widely practiced approach during the transition from a pagan to a Christian architectural language, particularly between the 5th and 7th centuries. The issue becomes especially delicate when dealing with cult buildings, which must meet spe-

cific requirements related to the rituals performed within them. The efforts made to convert pagan structures into the Christian language invite us to reflect on the principles that guided these transformations.

In the pagan world, architecture had for centuries represented the divine powers that governed human life. The gods were considered unreachable beings, inhabiting a world separate from that of humans, upon whom human existence depended. Consequently, within a hierarchical order, they dwelled in elevated places, and their distant, inaccessible nature was expressed architecturally: altars raised on mounds, temples standing on high *crepidoma*, dark *cellae* such as in the *oikoi*, or colonnaded enclosures surrounding sacred precincts.

The otherness of the divine in relation to the human condition was conveyed through mechanisms of disproportion,

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verticality, and darkness, features common to celebratory architectures across all major ancient civilizations, though articulated differently according to local technologies and decorative traditions. Decoration, always inspired by natural forms, could be rendered figuratively or through geometric patterns, bestowing dignity upon the architectural apparatus. If the ancient world relied for centuries on this idea of sacred architecture as an inaccessible place, it follows that the concept of architectural reuse was not commonly practiced. Materials (*spolia*) from older buildings were reused to construct new ones according to renewed principles. Structures were rebuilt to give them a new configuration: for example, a temple transformed into an *oikos* might become a distyle or tetrastyle structure, introducing significant variation. More often, however, materials were salvaged to enlarge an existing complex, an operation that typically required the demolition of the earlier temple. Importantly, architectural reuse did not affect the architectural language itself, which remained firmly fixed over time. The symbolic lexicon of architecture thus remained unchanged for centuries, reiterating the same formal patterns.

Considering that the ancient world, up to the Roman period, developed the celebratory architectural tradition using recurring compositional devices, we can turn our attention to the true emergence of architectural reuse within cultic contexts, and to how the nature of religious architecture changed in ways that made unexpected forms of reuse possible. The Christian architectural language transformed what we today might call the immaterial dimension, and more precisely, the mystagogical dimension, of cult buildings, making architecture a support for the liturgy and a means of emphasizing its ritual dynamics.

Although explaining the full process behind this transformation of meaning is complex, the overall trajectory, from the earliest decades of Christianity through the 7th century, can be summarized succinctly. Architecture underwent a resemanticization, acquiring a new ontological reality without requiring changes to the existing structure. During early Christianity, therefore, sacred monuments were not converted; instead, buildings such as houses, *domus*, or imperial palaces were reinterpreted. In the Roman context, the *domus*, originally the household dwelling, took on the meaning of *domus Dei*, the “house of God”, becoming a gathering place for the religious community.

A clear example of the resemanticization of architectural space is the *viridarium* of a villa (Canopus–Serapeion, Hadrian’s Villa, Rome, Italy): a place designed for hosting guests, characterized by water as a dominant element and by an exedra symbolizing hospitality. Conceptually, the exedra of the Roman villa gained a new meaning when transformed into the apse of a church, while the garden in front of it came to represent the paradisiacal realm of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

To better illustrate the most significant steps of this experimental architectural process, we present the study of the ancient site of Ascalona, modern Ashkelon, in Israel. Here, Roman remains emerging from the ancient sands of the eastern Mediterranean coast enable us to describe the functional transformation of a large structure known also as the church of Santa Maria in Viridis.

AskGate Mission: the research

The Italian International Archaeological Mission, known as AskGate and recognized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI), has been conducting research since 2020 on the case study of the so-called church of Santa Maria in Viridis (Luschi 2021; Luschi et al. 2023). The research team is composed of the mission director (Prof. Cecilia Maria Roberta Luschi), architects¹, archaeologists², physicists specialized in microarchaeology³, and geologists⁴, who together have made it possible to interpret this enigmatic architecture within the ancient city of Ascalona or Scalonga, located south of modern Ashkelon, which retains the historical name (Ricci, Lecci 2024).

Ascalona was one of the Philistine biblical cities that, together with Gaza, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath, formed a pentapolis independent of any hegemonic control. Egyptians, Syrians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, and the so-called Sea Peoples all left their traces in the site of Ascalona. The city occupied a strategic geographical position along a route parallel to the Mediterranean coast connecting Damascus and Alexandria (Fig. 1). Archival documents are broadly divided into two main strands: Arabic and Latin sources. These form the basis for reconstructing the city’s long history. Ascalona was destroyed in 1270 and largely faded into oblivion. It remained obscure until the rise of travel and pilgrimage in the 18th and 19th centuries, followed by formal archaeological excavations in the 20th century⁵.

Today, the ancient city of Ascalona is preserved as an Archaeological Park and National Nature Reserve (Israel Nature and Parks Authority), its boundaries following the course of the reconstructed city walls. The walls form a semicircular layout, with the maximum chord coinciding with the seafront, making the site analogous to Caesarea Maritima (Luschi, Stefanini and Vezzi 2021). Recognizing the historical depth of occupation, the morphology of Ascalona becomes clearly defined from the Roman-Byzantine period onward.

Ottoman period, including significant Roman elements, among which the most famous and studied is the colonnaded structure known as the Basilica, located between the tell and the Eastern Gate (Bar-Nathan, Ganor 2021; Boehm, Master and Le Blanc 2016) (Fig. 2).

Archaeological studies have identified the first Bronze Age settlement on the two tells, attributing the construction of the massive earthen ramparts to this same period. These ramparts were subsequently reused as the foundation for the city’s fortifications in later centuries. The walls currently visible are instead attributed to Byzantine construction phases, with further modifications during the medieval period. Along the circuit of these walls, still partially preserved today (Lec-

¹ Researchers from the University of Florence, members of the AskGate project team (<https://www.dida.unifi.it/vp-784-askgate.html>).

² Professor Rafael Y. Lewis, archaeologist, Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar Ilan University.

³ Professor Elisabetta Boaretto, Scientific Archaeology Unit, Weizmann Institute of Science.

⁴ Dr. Emma Cantisani, CNR Florence.

⁵ For a concise historical overview of the site, reference may be made to Stager and Schloen (2008) and Phythian-Adams (1921).

ci, Aiello and Luschi 2023), just south of the Eastern Gate, known in the medieval period as the Main Gate or Jerusalem Gate⁶, the case study of the church of Santa Maria in Viridis has been identified. The structure is organized on three terraces: the first, forming the highest part of the system, is characterized by massive double walls and the only semicircular tower projecting from the line of the walls; the second, the middle terrace, consists of a large structure whose spatial configuration has been interpreted by scholars as a church; the third and lowest terrace is composed of traces of walls indicating a further articulation of the building (Fig. 3).

The first construction phase identified in previous studies was a Byzantine church, but the placement and configuration of the baptismal font deviate from the established conventions of the Christian ritual. The baptismal font, whether of spring or still water, cannot be positioned in front of the celebration altar, as baptism is the initiation rite of Christianity and is to be performed outside the church.

Starting from this inconsistency, the research conducted by AskGate, which adopts a multiscale and interdisciplinary approach, has pursued investigations from multiple specialist perspectives aimed at interpreting and deeply understanding the architecture and its evolution. To this end, during field missions, in addition to excavation activities, detailed architectural and integrated surveys were conducted. These enabled the creation of a three-dimensional digital model of the site, metrically accurate and reliable, allowing both the production of orthogonal graphic representations (plans, sections, elevations) and an in-depth geometric analysis of the architectural space.

This article presents some results from the 2022–2023 excavation activities of the AskGate project. An integrated, multi-scale survey methodology combining topographic measurements with drone-based and ground-based photogrammetric techniques was employed to document these activities. The topographic survey was designed and implemented using a closed, nearly equilateral triangular traverse. Control and verification points were recorded from the main stations and used to process and manage the photogrammetric surveys. This established a well-working methodology across various archaeological campaigns (Luschi et al. 2023). In addition to the topographic survey, photogrammetric projects were carried out daily to obtain 3D models of the individual excavation areas. This made the various daily excavation activities accessible and developed a methodology for the virtual reversibility of the excavation (Luschi, Lecci 2023). The drone photogrammetry project created a 3D model of the site, from which two-dimensional images (orthophotos) were extracted to support the site plans, sections and elevations required for the description of the excavation and architectural structure. Operational decisions made during the different stages of the survey resulted in the creation of a 3D model of the site and all its excavation areas, ensuring accurate and reliable documentation (Luschi et al. 2025b).

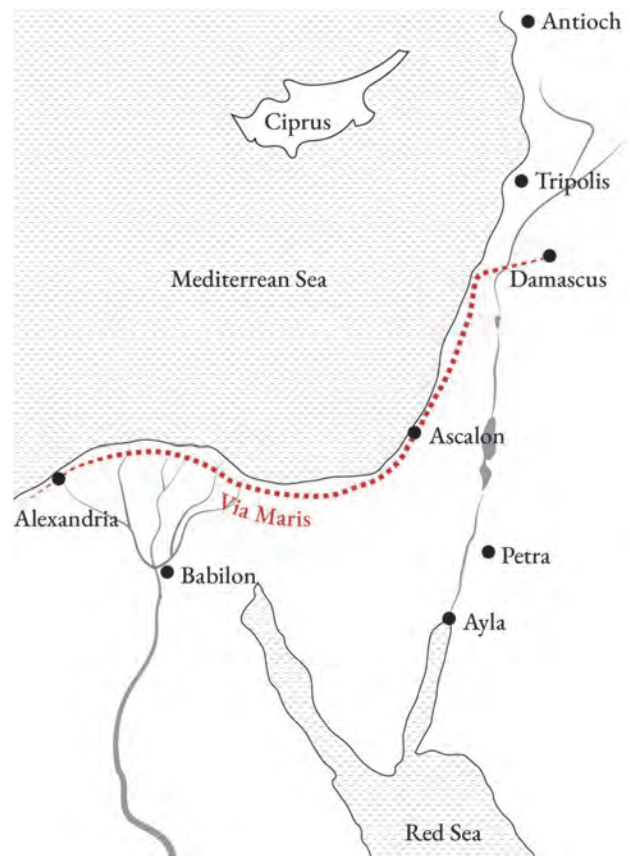


Fig. 1. The ancient city of Ascalona, Ascalon, or Scalona (now Ashkelon) has been located on the route connecting Damascus and Alexandria since ancient times (elaborated by @AskGate)

Il. 1. Starożytne miasto Ascalona, Ascalon lub Scalona (obecnie Aszkelon) od czasów starożytnych znajdowało się na szlaku łączącym Damaszek z Aleksandrią (oprac. @AskGate)

The viridarium and the church

As mentioned above, the church structure, located south of the Jerusalem Gate, has been described in previous excavation reports as a “Byzantine church with a baptistery” (Tzaferis, Stager 2008; Hoffman 2019, 33–38), modified several times up to the medieval period. This period also corresponds to the now-lost fresco cycle, depicting four figures that scholars have identified⁷, from right to left, as St. John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, and Gregory the Theologian, while the last figure has been proposed as either St. Athanasius or St. Cyril (Peers 2009).

Examining the frescoes, which show similarities in subject matter and style, Peers considers it plausible to date their execution to the Crusader renewal phase of the church, between 1153 and 1187. It is notable that the characteristics of the saints’ garments and the presence of a cartouche with Greek inscriptions find parallels in the depiction of St. John Chrysostom⁸ in the medieval Cattolica of Stilo in Calabria

⁶ Guglielmo of Tyre, a 12th-century chronicler, describes Ascalona as a fortified city with four gates: the Jaffa Gate to the north, the Gaza Gate to the south, the Maris Gate to the west, and the Great Gate or Jerusalem Gate to the east (Zaganelli 2012, 982–988).

⁷ Fresco of the apse and a detail still visible at the time of the Leon Levy mission. Today it has completely disappeared.

⁸ Fresco inside the Cattolica of Stilo in Calabria, dated 1190. It depicts St. John Chrysostom, with garments and a cartouche similar to those found at Santa Maria in Viridis.



Fig. 2. Within the Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL) ancient city, historical architectures can be identified based on historical documents and archaeological studies (elaborated by @AskGate)

Il. 2. W starożytnym mieście Ascalona (Aszkelon, IL) zabytkową architekturę można zidentyfikować na podstawie dokumentów historycznych i badań archeologicznych (oprac. @AskGate)

which is reproduced with the same iconography. Based on this evidence, the possible dating of the frescoes can be extended to the 11th and 12th centuries, revealing in this phase a strong influence of the Byzantine culture.

Santa Maria in Viridis is also defined as a church with a baptistery due to the presence of a water system located on the central plateau (second terrace), which is particularly complex. The water flow, whose source remains unknown, started from the apse, where a basin clad with white marble slabs was placed. From there, through a small channel, it reached a possibly fountain-like basin, before entering a cistern and finally passing through a lead pipe and a small cistern (Figs. 4, 5).

Cleaning, excavation and survey work carried out in this section of the Santa Maria in Viridis architectural complex (identified as “Area 1”) has enabled the water system to be reconstructed and interpreted as a whole, and a functional interpretation proposed. The discovered water system leads to the identification of the surrounding area as a *viridarium*: a classic ornamental garden used in ancient Rome and typically located within the courtyard of a villa (Luschi et al. 2025a).

In Santa Maria in Viridis’ site, the exedra from which the water emerged, clad in white marble, collected the water at its base and, by gravity, through the central slightly sloping channel, fed the basin, also entirely finished in white marble.

The centre of the podium therefore functions as a courtyard that can be dated back to the Roman period, which lasted approximately four centuries in the history of the city. The site is attested as an *oppidum liberum* under Roman authority from 104 BC (Phythian-Adams 1921), and

historical sources confirm an urban profile with public, commercial, and productive structures⁹.

According to the AskGate hypothesis, there are clear parallels between the *viridarium* and its water system and Herod’s building projects, as reported by Flavius Josephus regarding the construction of fountains and porticoes in Ascalona (Josephus Flavius 1974, I, 422).

To verify this hypothesis and provide more specific details about the structure, investigations were carried out into construction techniques alongside archaeological analyses of the excavation stratigraphy and material characterization. During the excavations, mortar samples were taken from within the water system and are currently being analysed through petrographic, mineralogical and microarchaeological studies¹⁰.

The reconfigured presbytery floor is located above the level of the channel and the exedra basin, representing a complete obliteration of the previous water system and basin. It includes the area of the basin within the exedra, occupied by a throne placed at the centre of the apse and raised approximately 80 cm above the level of the altar, which itself is elevated by at least three steps from the rest of

⁹ Documents and findings indicate that, during the Roman period, the city was a maritime center with a significant port, renowned for trade (Di Segni, Tsafirir and Green 2015, 1021), but also a hub of manufacturing and agricultural activities (Di Segni, Tsafirir and Green 2015, 1029–1031).

¹⁰ The mineralogical and petrographic analyses were carried out by the team supervised by Emma Cantisani of the CNR in Firenze. The microarchaeological analyses (FTIR and C14) were conducted at the Scientific Archaeology Unit laboratory of the Weizmann Institute of Science (Israel) by the team supervised by Elisabetta Boaretto.



Fig. 3. Photographs of the church called Santa Maria in Viridis, located along the city walls near the main gate, also known as the Jerusalem Gate, in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL). The site is organized across three terraces: a) the entire site occupied by the architectural complex, b) the rounded tower of the city walls behind the church, c) the level of the church and the four standing granite columns (elaborated by @AskGate, mission 2023)

Il. 3. Zdjęcia kościoła zwanego Santa Maria in Viridis, położonego wzdłuż murów miejskich w pobliżu bramy głównej, znanej również jako Brama Jerozolimiska, w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL). Teren jest podzielony na trzy tarasy: a) cały teren zajmowany przez kompleks architektoniczny, b) zaokrąglona wieża murów miejskich za kościołem, c) poziom kościoła i cztery granitowe kolumny (oprac. @AskGate, misja 2023)

the nave. Two granite columns with white marble bases and single scotia mouldings frame the front. Interestingly, clay material was used to fill the basin in the exedra, likely intended to seal it and prevent the possible emergence of water.

If the floor reveals a classical building while the paintings refer to a medieval church, it is necessary to continue analysing the composition of the main front to obtain a more complete understanding. The exedra–apse is flanked by two niches, the *pastophoria*, which in their current configuration feature pointed arches at the top and traces of marble cladding at the bottom.

Analysis of their construction clearly shows that the pointed upper part of the niches was cut into the preexisting wall, while the lower portion was partially filled in (Figs. 6–8). The reconfiguration of these two niches reflects an original classical structure, with a straight upper profile and positioned nearly at floor level. To convert the structure into a church, these two architectural elements of strong aesthetic value, were enlarged in height and capped with a pointed arch form, cutting through the courses of the wall blocks. The pointed geometry of the two *pastophoria*, the *protiron* to the north and the *diaconicon* to the south of the apse, indicates

a medieval rather than Byzantine period¹¹, consistent with the likely later dating of the frescoes (Lecci 2025, 192–194). This configuration became widespread particularly between the 12th and 13th centuries, and in the Holy Land similar pointed-arch features are found in architectural elements, for example in the openings of Montfort Castle (Luschi, Aiello 2012; 2017; Aiello 2010, 42, 43). These observations have led to a reassessment of the original function of the site and to the understanding that it was converted into a Latin Christian cultic structure during the medieval period.

Conclusions

The architectural reading of the site, and the compositional and functional analyses, have led to an interpretation

¹¹ In line with the prevailing historiographical periodization, the text defines the “Byzantine period” as the time span up to the 7th century, which concludes with the Muslim conquest of the first half of the 7th century (Phythian-Adams 1921; Stager, Schloen 2008). However, the Christian-Byzantine heritage in Ascalona demonstrates a longer persistence, as documented by the presence of bishops in the city at less than the 10th century (Bagatti 1974).



Fig. 4. Photographs of the church called Santa Maria in Viridis, in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL), and details from the water system: a) the water system located on the structure of the plateau (second terrace) [The water system is lined with white marble, fragments of which have been found. It includes basin, channel, fountain, inspection basin and cistern.], b) the basin in the apse, c) the connection channel, d) the basin (photos by @AskGate)

Il. 4. Fotografie kościoła zwanego Santa Maria in Viridis w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL) oraz detale systemu wodnego: a) system wodny znajdujący się na konstrukcji plateau (drugi taras) [System wodny wyłożony jest białym marmurem, którego fragmenty zostały znalezione. Obejmuje on basen, kanał, fontannę, basen inspekcyjny i cysternę], b) basen w absydzie, c) kanał łączący, d) basen (fot. @AskGate)

of the structure that identifies a phase predating its configuration as a medieval church, which can instead be traced back to a classical-period building. The considerations discussed above allow for the formulation of new reconstruction hypotheses, according to which the space and its architectural elements were converted using new design languages, adapting the space to its new use.

In the hypothesis that sees the previous configuration of the medieval church as a structure of Roman period, it is

possible to recognize: an exedra, later transformed into an apse; a system of basins and channels, whose structure recalls that of nymphaea, a term used with various nuances over time (Settis 1973), also indicating monumental fountains¹² (Figs. 9, 10).

¹² In order to support and disseminate the research findings via a mobile application, graphic reconstructions of the three historical functions served by the architectural structure were developed; these images

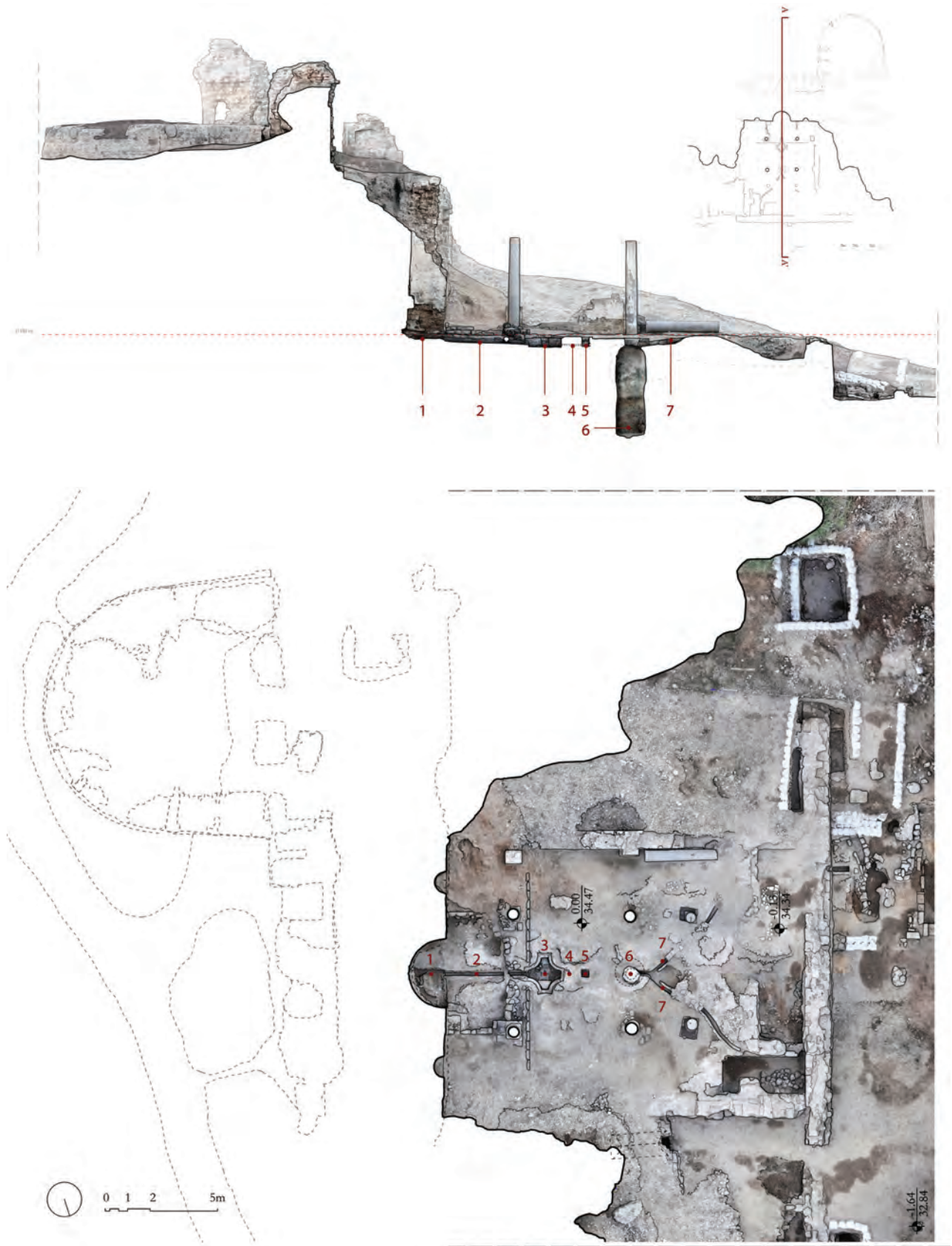


Fig. 5. Plan and section of the site in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL) following the 2023 excavations carried out by the AskGate project. The elements of the water system are indicated: 1 – basin located in the exedra, 2 – channel connecting the exedra to the basin, 3 – basin, 4 – lead pipe connecting the basin to the small pit, 5 – small pit, 6 – reservoir, 7 – small channels converging into the reservoir (elaborated by @AskGate)

Il. 5. Plan i przekrój terenu w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL) po wykopaliskach w 2023 r. przeprowadzonych w ramach projektu AskGate. Wskazano elementy systemu wodnego: 1 – zbiornik zlokalizowany w eksedrze, 2 – kanał łączący eksedrę z basenem, 3 – basen, 4 – ołowiana rura łącząca basen z małym wykopem, 5 – mały wykop, 6 – zbiornik, 7 – małe kanały zbiegające się do zbiornika (oprac. @AskGate)



Fig. 6. The northern pastophorion of the medieval church near the Jerusalem Gate in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL). They were evidently remodelled by cutting through the entire wall facing. Afterwards, they were plastered and painted with Christian-themed verses in the Arabic language (photo by @AskGate)

Il. 6. Północne pastoforium średniowiecznego kościoła w pobliżu Bramy Jerozolimskiej w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL). Zostały one najwyraźniej przebudowane poprzez przebicie całej ściany elewacyjnej. Następnie otynkowano je i pomalowano pokrywając wersetami w języku arabskim (fot. @AskGate)

The exedra and the nymphaeum are, moreover, closely related elements, since originally the term indicated a sacred place dedicated to nymphs, characterized by above ground

were created by overlaying drawings by Prof. Andrea Ricci onto the 3D model representation (Luschi, Vezzi 2025; Vezzi 2024).

or subterranean spaces with water features, where the exedra becomes a metaphor for a grotto and is often adorned with decorations evoking a natural environment. This relationship is also reflected in the analysis of the Ascalona remains. The space, which may have been marble-clad, as suggested by the stone fragments found in the niches, the exedra, and

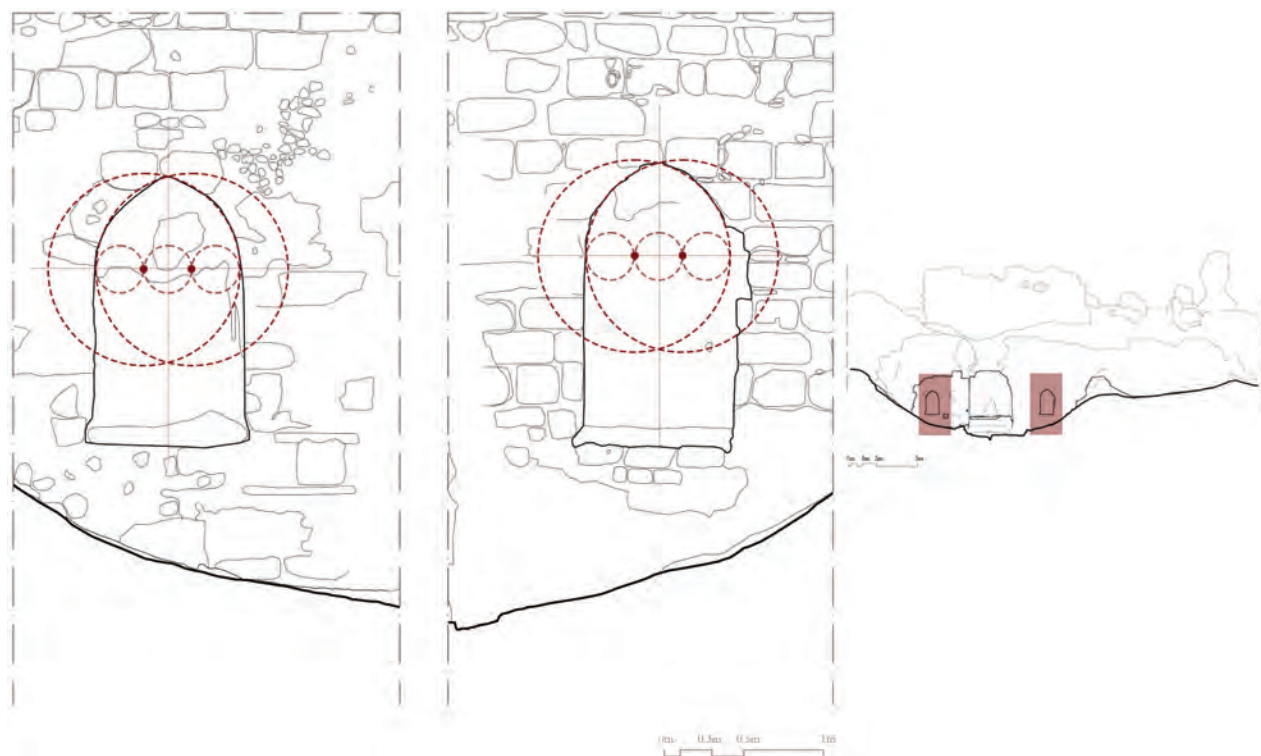


Fig. 7. Geometric study of the shape of the niches, the pastophoria of the medieval church near the Jerusalem Gate in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL). The arch delimiting them at the top is a pointed arch. The radius of curvature of the arches forming the figure is equal to two-thirds of the span of the niche (elaborated by @AskGate)

Il. 7. Geometryczne studium kształtu nisz, pastoforiów średniowiecznego kościoła w pobliżu Bramy Jerozolimskiej w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL). Łuk ograniczający je od góry jest ostrołukowy. Promień okręgu tworzącego krzywiznę łuku jest równy dwóm trzecim rozpiętości niszy (oprac. @AskGate)



Fig. 8. Façade of the church near the Jerusalem Gate in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL). The section passes through the channel. The second terrace, on which the church is built, and the third terrace, corresponding to the city walls at the top of the embankment, are visible (elaborated by @AskGate based on 2023 survey)

Il. 8. Fasada kościoła w pobliżu Bramy Jerozolimskiej w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL). Przekrój przechodzi przez kanał. Widoczny jest drugi taras, na którym stoi kościół, oraz trzeci taras, odpowiadający murom miejskim u góry nabrzeża (oprac. @AskGate na podstawie badań z 2023)

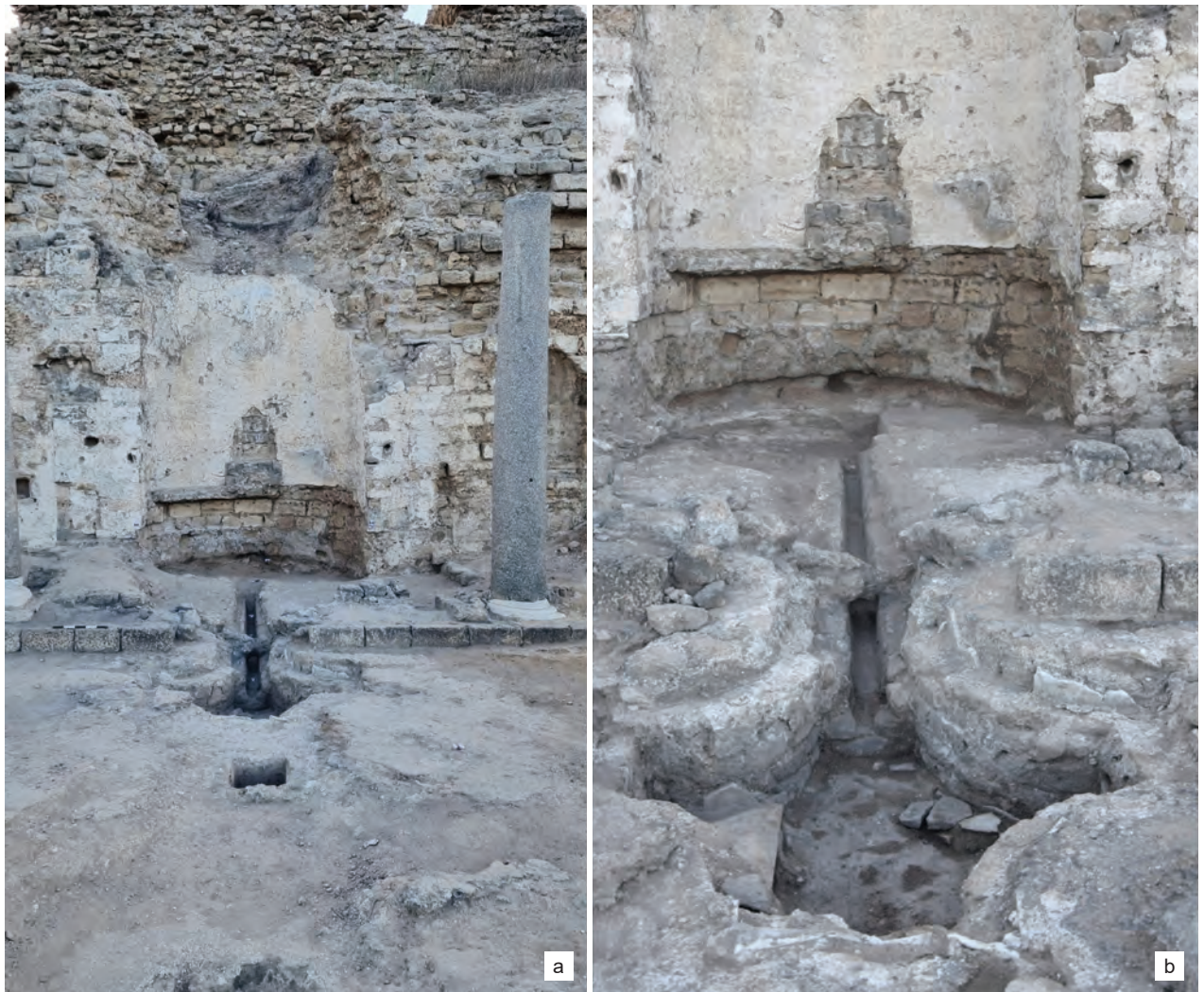


Fig. 9. Photographs of the site in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL): a) the apse with the partially exposed presbytery floor, supporting the columns, which reveals the channel running underneath, connecting the apse to the basin, b) detail of the basin, where fragments of the marble cladding are still visible (photos by @AskGate)

Il. 9. Zdjęcia stanowiska w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL): a) absyda z częściowo odsłoniętą posadzką prezbiterium, na której spoczywają kolumny, widoczny kanał łączący absydę z basenem, b) fragment basenu, gdzie nadal widoczne są fragmenty marmurowej okładziny (fot. @AskGate)

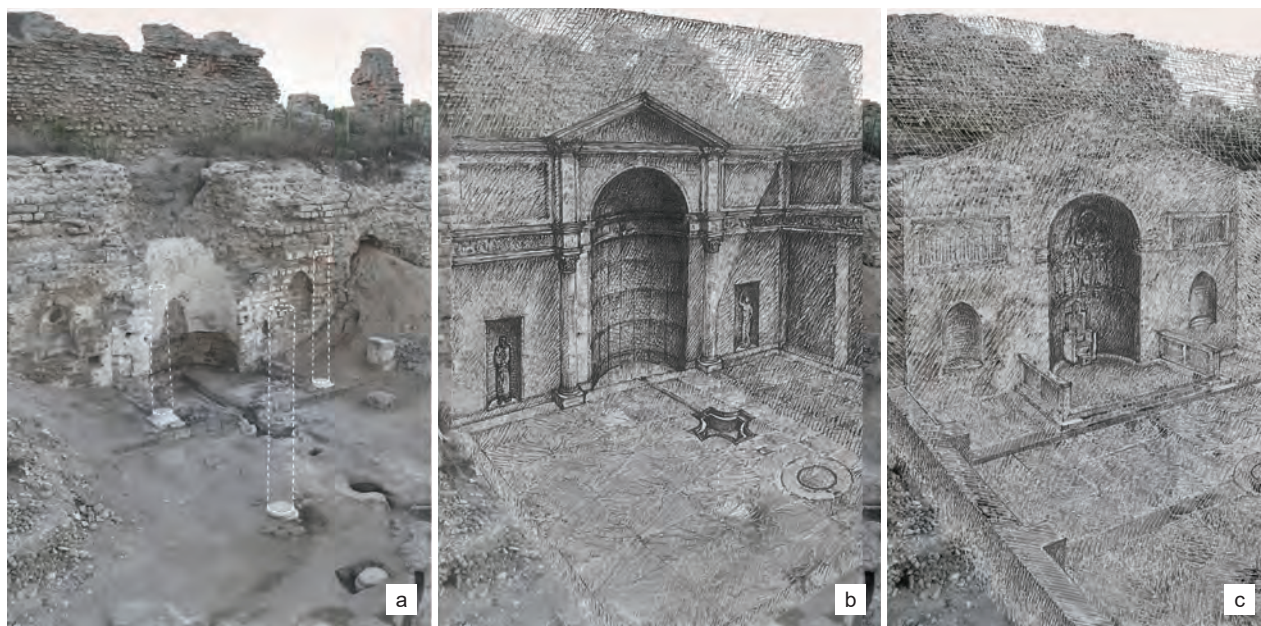


Fig. 10. The church near the Jerusalem Gate in Ascalona (Ashkelon, IL) and reconstruction hypotheses: a) the 3D model visualization of the site with the columns removed, b) a perspective view of a reconstruction hypothesis of the Roman viridarium, c) a perspective view of a reconstruction hypothesis of the medieval church (elaborated by @AskGate)

Il. 10. Kościół w pobliżu Bramy Jerozolimskiej w Ascalonie (Aszkelon, IL) i hipotezy rekonstrukcji: a) wizualizacja 3D stanowiska z usuniętymi kolumnami, b) perspektywiczny widok hipotezy rekonstrukcji rzymskiego wirydarza, c) perspektywiczny widok hipotezy rekonstrukcji średniowiecznego kościoła (oprac. @AskGate)

the basin, seems to recall known models such as the Nymphaeum of the Erotes in Ostia: an open space entirely clad in marble, with a semicircular niche on one of the walls, other niches arranged along the perimeter, and a central fountain. A similar configuration can be found in the nymphaeum of the Villa of the Mosaic Columns in Pompeii, where the space is defined by an exedra built against a wall, with a fountain arranged along the same axis of symmetry. Nymphaea and *viridaria* are architectural types that are widespread throughout the Mediterranean basin, including the southeastern provinces. In these regions, however, such structures tend to be limited to contexts of marked monumentality, as documented by the current state of research (Lamare 2019).

This hypothesis is further supported by the presence of a lead pipe connecting the basin to the small square basin, a technology widely used in the Roman world.

Considering these comparisons, the structure in Ascalona was originally likely an open space: an atrium, or a Roman type *viridarium*, characterized by the presence of water. The reuse of the architectural structure as a church can instead be associated with the raising of the presbyterial area and the consequent obliteration of the water system.

Thus, it was not a baptistery with a font, but an echo of the classical structure that reorganizes a garden into a conceptual garden, that is, the church, which inhabits the exedra space through the composition of the apse and appropriates the niches of aesthetic and decorative value, transforming them into storage for liturgical objects. The eminence of the place is ensured by the elevation of the presbyterial floor, both for the seating and the altar, thus allowing the water system, whose presence would have hindered the performance of the ritual, to be removed.

We are therefore faced with the reuse and resemanticization of a pagan civil space into a religious architecture, translating its mystagogical reading. We propose, therefore, the representation of what has survived over two thousand years of history. In this site, it is possible to observe both the original characteristics and the reuse implemented by the Christian domain, which, following its prescriptions, was able to make the pagan architecture express a new function. True reuse is thus the meaning of that immaterial dimension that architecture can express when properly configured.

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Streszczenie

Starożytna praktyka adaptacji budynku. Od rzymskiego viridarium po średniowieczny kościół w starożytnym Aszkelonie (Izrael)

Przedstawione w artykule badania skoncentrowane były na analizie architektonicznej i funkcjonalnej budowli znanej jako kościół Santa Maria in Viridis, położonej w najwyższym punkcie starożytnego miasta Askalona (Ashkelon, Izrael), bezpośrednio przy murach miejskich i w pobliżu średniowiecznej Bramy Głównej (Brama Jerozolimiska). Tradycyjnie interpretowana jako kościół bizantyński z baptysterium i poddawana przekształceniom aż do okresu średniowiecznego budowla ta wykazuje liczne niespójności architektoniczne związane z użytkowaniem liturgicznym.

Misja AskGate (Włoska Misja Archeologiczna – MAECI) przeprowadziła badania i szczegółowe analizy, stosując zintegrowaną, wieloskalową metodologię, aby rozwiązać problemy kompozycyjne, które utrudniały jednoznaczne określenie przestrzeni kościoła. Badania architektoniczne i kompozycyjne ujawniły, że kościół został wzniesiony na wcześniejszym rzymskim *viridarium*, wyposażonym w złożony system wodny i ninfeo, zorganizowanym na co najmniej dwóch poziomach tarasowych opartych na podium. *Viridarium* obejmowało eksedrę z marmurową misą zbierającą wodę i kierującą ją kanałem do basenu położonego w centrum dziedzińca. Na podstawie analizy architektonicznej oraz badań elementów dekoracyjnych, takich jak freski, można wnosić, że znacząca była faza średniowieczna, podczas której budowla została przekształcona w kościół. Faza ta może odpowiadać przemianom miejsca z przestrzeni definiowanej przez pogański język architektoniczny, charakteryzujący się obecnością eksedry, w przestrzeń wyrażającą język chrześcijański, podkreślony obecnością absydy.

Słowa kluczowe: Aszkelon, viridarium, mistagogia, architektura historyczna, dziedzictwo kulturowe

