

Roman Ashkelon and the “Building Program” of Herod

The ancient city of Ashkelon, which lies on the southern coast of present day Israel, is perhaps most famous for its Middle Bronze Age fortification walls, Philistine remains and Phoenician dog burials. While the bulk of research has focused on these early levels at Ashkelon, it remains a site with a rich and complex history extending into the Medieval period, largely due to its location on a busy and strategic series of shipping and trade routes. Ashkelon was one of the major ports of the Hellenistic period, and Josephus later reports that it was beautified by Herod the Great, who may have been born in the city; the buildings which were erected under Herod’s patronage included bathhouses, fountains, colonnades and even a palace intended for the Emperor Augustus (Josephus *BJ* 1.422, 2.98). To date, a bathhouse (probably dating to the fourth century CE), two basilicas (one of which the excavators date to the Severan period) and a theater, all belonging to the remains of Roman Ashkelon, have been excavated; the bathhouse famously featured a drain which contained the bodies of more than 100 infants, perhaps evidence for the use of the bathhouse as a brothel (Faerman *et al.* 1998: 861). The mosaic from Madaba also depicts Ashkelon in the Byzantine period, where the city apparently boasted a colonnaded-lined *decumanus* and *cardo*, possibly with an honorific arch. Ashkelon was a major producer of wine in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, during which the city perhaps underwent a renaissance, reaching a level of prominence that it would maintain until its final destruction in 1270 CE (Stager *et al.* 2008: 10). In addition, several pieces of elaborate sculptural decoration were uncovered during excavations by Lady Hester Stanhope and John Garstang in the 19th and early 20th centuries, including a statue of Nike perched on a globe held by Atlas, a sculpture of Tyche and a large cuirassed statue of an emperor, now lost. All of this evidence presents a compelling case for Ashkelon as a major city throughout the Roman period which probably enjoyed the patronage of kings and emperors.

This paper, then, seeks to examine the extent and type of architecture present at Ashkelon during the Roman period, including the layout of the city (perhaps reorganized and laid out with a *decumanus* and *cardo* during the Severan period burst of building activity) and the dating of the monumental buildings noted by Garstang and Stager. The Roman period at Ashkelon has only been examined briefly (Stager 1991) and of the monumental buildings only the basilica has been the subject of a detailed study (Fischer 1995). This paper intends to address this void, especially focusing on the late Hellenistic and early Roman period at Ashkelon and considering what evidence, if any, remains of Herod’s building program, and when and why the city was restructured according to typical Roman urban concepts to include a *decumanus*, *cardo* and possibly an honorific arch. Viewed in light of the fact that Ashkelon remained an autonomous city throughout the Roman period and, as a former Philistine city often found itself politically at odds with its Jewish neighbors especially in the First Jewish Revolt in 69 CE, I suggest that the monumental buildings, artwork and layout of Roman Ashkelon highlight the city’s efforts to position itself as a cosmopolitan metropolis in order to compete with neighboring seaports (Gaza, in particular) and to forge links with Rome.

Works Cited

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