

Real and Imagined Cityscapes of Late Antique Ascalon

To what extent can historical depictions of the Mediterranean port of Ascalon serve as a window into its appearance in Late Antiquity?

Until its destruction in the Third Crusade, Ascalon had been a thriving port city for millennia. Home to a 6th century CE urban theorist named Julian, whose treatise in Greek survives, we can surmise the spatial-organizational priorities of the city in his era, its zoning policy, and aspects of its building codes (Saliou 1996). But what of the Late Antique city's appearance, how can we reconstruct this? Archaeological excavations carried out sporadically from the early 1800s by foreign and local teams, and most notably from 1985-2016, have revealed many Late Antique contexts, but often little architecture survives aside from foundations, as government-sanctioned quarrying of the site in the Ottoman era led to the removal of most of the surviving architecture of antiquity to build new constructions in cities up the coast (Mayron 1846, Stager et al. 2008, Hoffman 2019, Greenhalgh 2019, Dell'Acqua 2021).

To supplement the knowledge gleaned from these remains, we can turn to depictions of the city in mosaic and painting. The city is depicted in three surviving mosaics from Byzantine churches in Jordan – at Madaba, Umm ar-Rasas, and Ma'in (Piccirillo 1993). Such depictions are limited in scope but are intended to convey sufficient information about a site to distinguish it from others in its vicinity. They necessarily focus on monuments, armatures, and fortifications.

A second source are the depictions of the city made by early modern artists on their grand tours, notably the Scottish painter John Roberts and the French painter Auguste de Forbin (Roberts 1842-49, Howe 1996, Le Rouzic 2015). Such sources offer the advantage of depicting

standing architecture since despoliated and not otherwise documented, but suffer from the disadvantage of conforming to the aesthetic preferences the artists and their audiences.

This paper argues that the contemporary mosaic depictions aimed at abstractions and schematization, while early modern depictions preferred fantastical elaboration – yet in each case there is a kernel of truth to these cityscapes, from which we can supplement the scant evidence provide by architectural remains and deepen our understanding of the Late Roman city’s appearance. This enables a fuller assessment of urban space in Late Antique Ascalon – its architecture, its organization, and the means by which people circulated through the city – thereby strengthening our impression of daily life in the ancient city.

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