

“Doves at the Crossroads”: The Sacred Identity of Roman Ascalon

This paper investigates the nature and role of cult in Ascalon, a city on the southern coast of Palestine, in the Roman period. Ascalon was a large and cosmopolitan port, controlled in the Persian period by Tyre and then by the Seleucids and Ptolemies in the Hellenistic period. Ascalon's background as a Hellenized Phoenician city with close ties to the Greek and then Roman worlds, is reflected in rich variety of deities included in the city's public cults. Gods of local origin, including Derketo, the mother of the Babylonian queen Semiramis, and the enigmatic war-like god Phanebalos were featured on coins alongside the more traditionally Hellenized gods Poseidon, Aphrodite, the Dioscouri and Tyche. Isis and a local variant of Horus-Harpocrates are also featured prominently on coins and Isis alongside Nikai and a kneeling Atlas on the façade of the city's early third century CE bouleuterion.

Previous studies have emphasized the ways in which cult, myth and images of the gods in Ascalon demonstrate the persistence of a Phoenician cultural and religious identity (Fuks 2000; Belayche 2001, 2009) beneath a thin 'vener' of Hellenization. In this paper I problematize this conclusion and point to the many ways in which the myths, cults and deities of Ascalon served to situate the city within the mythological and cultural framework of the Roman empire. Taking into account architectural, sculptural, numismatic, epigraphic and literary evidence I argue that Ascalonian elites in the Roman period consciously crafted a new sacred identity that integrated and promoted elements of multiple cultural traditions. Public cult was used to negotiate a relationship between the city and the gods of the empire, and to situate Ascalon's history and traditions within and in relation to regional and imperial traditions and frameworks.

Bibliography

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