

ASCALONA SPOLIATA. THE DISMANTLING OF THE ROMAN CITY AND THE REUSE IN LATE AND POST-CLASSICAL ERAS THROUGH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY EVIDENCE*

ABSTRACT

La città di Ascalona si colloca nella parte meridionale della costa israeliana, 50 km a sud da Giaffa e 13 km a nord di Gaza. La posizione sul mare ha da sempre favorito la sua natura di città portuale, dall'antichità fino al periodo crociato e alla conquista araba nel tredicesimo secolo. La continuità insediativa, dall'età del Bronzo fino a epoca medievale, ha certamente portato al formarsi di un sito pluristratificato, ma allo stesso tempo ha causato lo smontaggio di molti edifici e il riuso di materiali architettonici in nuove fabbriche, sia nella città stessa, sia altrove, soprattutto in siti lungo la costa. Questo contributo è incentrato sul fenomeno degli *spolia* della città romana e intende analizzare: la gestione del processo di spoliazione in epoca post-classica; le finalità e le dinamiche del riuso e il raggio di diffusione dei reperti reimpiegati.

The city of Ashqelon lies on the southern part of the Israeli coast, 50 km south of Jaffa, and 13 km north of Gaza. It was a relevant port city during Antiquity, until the Crusaders and the Arab conquest in the 13th century when it was destroyed and abandoned. The continuity of the settlement resulted in a rich archaeological deposit, spanning from the Bronze Age to the Medieval period. Still, at the same time, it also caused the dismantling of several buildings and the reuse of architectural debris in the city itself or elsewhere, mostly in other sites along the coast. This paper deals with the *spolia* of the Roman town, and aims to evaluate the management of the dismantling process in the post-Classical era, the purposes and dynamics of the reuse as well as its geographical spread.

INTRODUCTION

Just as erecting a building, dismantling it is also a planned process that requires good management, organization, and proficiency:¹ Theodoret of Cyrus, for example, re-

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¹ See BARKER – MARANO 2017 for the specific legislation on the re-use in Roman building industry; MARSILI 2016; for specific case studies see e.g. TEATINI 2019 for the dismantling process in Thignica (Tunisia), SCARDOZZI 2010 for Hierapolis; CAVALIERI 2020 for the organization of the dismantling acti-

counts how John Chrysostom, at the end of the 4th century CE, employed skilled workers and other man power for dismantling the pagan sanctuaries in Phoenicia.²

Especially in Antiquity, the reuse of architectural materials was relevant for economic purposes³ – as testified by numerous laws regulating this phenomenon –⁴ not to mention the role of specific kinds of *spolia* (e.g., sarcophagi, columns, capitals) with material and cultural significance.⁵

Whereas this subject has been investigated mainly in Italy⁶ and – to a slightly lesser extent – in the western part of the Empire,⁷ for the territory of Roman Palestine – and more specifically the land currently part of modern Israel – this field of research is almost unexplored.⁸ But this is no different for the rest of the Eastern Empire.⁹ In this respect, this paper intends to offer the first set of considerations on the use of *spolia* through the case study Ashqelon.

Material, both architectural and sculptural, is not always reused the same way: one item can be recycled with the same or a different function, it can be visible or simply buried in foundations or built into walls where it can no longer be seen; it can be paired and displayed close to another element imitating the Ancient one.¹⁰ In Ashqelon, this semantic differentiation of the *spolia* is far from recognizable, to a great extent because contexts were heavily plundered, and in part because previous archaeological excavations still need to be published.

vities at the villa of Torraccia d'Aiano.

² Theod. *HE* v, 30.

³ BARKER 2010; BARKER 2011.

⁴ ANGIUSSOLA 2002; MARANO 2012; MARANO 2013.

⁵ The theme of *spolia* became particularly popular in '80s-'90s, after some early studies (ESCH 1969; DEICHMANN 1975). Consequently, the related literature is limitless. For the key-points of the theme see BRILLIANT 1982; SETTIS 1986; DE LACHENAL 1995; PENSABENE – PANELLA 1996; KINNEY 1997; LIVERANI 2004; BRILLIANT – KINNEY 2011; SENA CHIESA 2012. For a wider study see GREENHALGH 1989, who examined case studies all around the Mediterranean basin.

⁶ Beside the literature in the previous footnote, more specific studies are, among many others, CUSCITO 2012; TODISCO 1994 for Southern Italy; PENSABENE – PANELLA 1993-1994, PENSABENE 2015 for Rome; FUDULI 2018 for Sicily.

⁷ FLEMING 2016; for UK see STOCKER 1990 and EATON 2000.

⁸ See FISCHER 1998, pp. 287-291; TCHERKHOVETS 2016; TARKHANOVA 2019.

⁹ In general this topic has rarely been investigated in the eastern part of the Empire, except from Constantinople (see as latter JEVTIĆ – YALMAN 2018). For Greece and Athens, for example, see PAPALEXANDROU 2003; FREY 2015; FUDULI forthcoming. A collection of capitals in the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, some of them reused, can be found in WILKINSON 1987.

¹⁰ Scholars dealing with reused materials – mostly within the Italian school – differentiate between *spolia in se* (an ancient item is reused as witness of the past) and *spolia in re* (when an element is manufactured to imitate an ancient one, usually in Late Antique or Medieval buildings). See BRILLIANT 1982; SETTIS 1986.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the city (fig. 1) begins in the Chalcolithic; through the ages, it was dominated by the Philistines, Assyrians, Egyptians and it was ruled by the Ptolemies after Alexander the Great's death, until it became autonomous in the 1st century BCE when it started to mint silver coins.¹¹

Formally, the city maintained its autonomy even after Pompey established the Province of Syria in 63 BCE and, although it was not part of Herod's kingdom, it benefited from the king's donations, who, according to literary sources, built baths, magnificent fountains and colonnades.¹²

Our knowledge of the city during the Roman period is mostly incomplete: for example, an ancient source tells us that an anonymous building hosted a bronze tablet containing the decrees that Caesar made in favor of Hyrcanus, high priest and ruler (*ethnarch*) of the Jews;¹³ between the 1st and the 2nd century CE, its urban structures, which included city walls¹⁴ and a harbor,¹⁵ were fundamentally renovated, in particular the city center (fig. 2), reaching its peak in the second half of the 2nd century CE, when the civic Basilica was rebuilt and embellished with imported marble and colored stones from Greece, Egypt, and Asia Minor.¹⁶ Scattered archaeological remains and literary sources attest the existence of long colonnaded streets and buildings for entertainment¹⁷ (theater and *odeion*).¹⁸

In the second half of the 4th century,¹⁹ Ashqelon became part of the administrative province *Palaestina Prima*, with *Caesarea Maritima* as the capital. This status did not change until the Muslim conquest in 644,²⁰ which did not cause the abandonment of the settlement as it had in Yahvne.²¹

After shortly having been re-conquered by the Byzantines in 680, who evacuated the inhabitants and destroyed the fortifications, only five years later, the city was an-

¹¹ For the general history of the city see: STAGER 1993, 103-112; STAGER – SCHLOEN – MASTER 2008; ISAAC 2014, 237-252. DELL'ACQUA 2021a and with further reference.

¹² Flav. Jos. BJ, I, 422.

¹³ Flav. Jos. AJ, XIV, 197.

¹⁴ Flav. Jos. BJ, III, 12, but also Pomponius Mela (first half of the 1st century CE) compares Gaza, *ingens* and *munita*, to Ashqelon, which is *non minor*. Mela 1,11,64

¹⁵ Although the infrastructure has not yet been found, Ashqelon was a port city already during the Bronze Age. See RABAN – TSUR – CASPA 2008. The harbor is also mentioned in the letter of Aristean 155 of Hellenistic date. WRIGHT 2015, 230, 232-233.

¹⁶ For the basilica see FISCHER 1995; BOHEM – MASTER – LE BLANC 2016; DELL'ACQUA 2021b.

¹⁷ Tickets for both these buildings were bought in the 4th century by the Egyptian Theophanes, who travelled from Egypt to Antiochia, stopping in Ashqelon for a couple of days (ROBERTS – TURNER 1952, n. 627, lines 213-220; MATTHEWS 2006, p. 60).

¹⁸ DELL'ACQUA 2021a.

¹⁹ AVI-YONAH 1966, p. 121; AVI-YONAH 1984, p. 228; BIANCHI 2007, p. 15.

²⁰ GIL 1992, p. 60; HOFFMAN 2019, pp. 3-4.

²¹ MOSHE – TAXEL 2014.

nexed to the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwān.²² The Abbasid domination lasted until 969,²³ when the Fatimids took over power.²⁴

In 1096, pope Urban II urged for an armed pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Ashqelon fell into the Crusaders' hands in 1100, but during the 12th-13th century, it alternatively shifted between the Muslims and Crusaders,²⁵ first with the Fatimids's occupation until 1153 and then with the new conquest of king Baldwin II. Saladin besieged the city and took it in 1187;²⁶ later on, Richard of Cornwall took possession and restored the walls.²⁷ Lastly, Sultan Baybars dismantled the city in 1270 and had the harbor filled in. Several Arab geographers, eyewitness to the 14th century, described a landscape of ruins;²⁸ one of them, Ibn Taymiyya, wrote in 1316: «a desert place like Ascalon, with no house left in it [...] there is no merit in travel in it».²⁹

Despite the desolation, the settlement continued to attract Muslim pilgrims during the 16th and 17th centuries:³⁰ little changed in the years leading up to 1695, when the French traveler Laurent d'Arvieux visited «cette ville désolée».³¹

THE DISMANTLING OF ROMAN ASHQELON

A catastrophic event affected the city in the 4th century CE: A letter attributed to Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, lists Ashqelon among the cities that were struck³² by the earthquake of May 19th 363. The city was hit twice, on Monday in the morning (around 9 am) and during the night (3 am). A large area, running from the Galilee to Petra suffered damage.³³ Recent investigations in the *basilica* brought to light evidence of the event. Damages to the floor of the building were noticed. It had been lifted by the waves of the earthquake.³⁴ Remains of the building – never rebuilt – were most like-

²² LE STRANGE 1890, p. 400.

²³ During the Ikhshidid dynasty, in 940 the church of St. Mary the green was destroyed and plundered by Jews and Muslims and the bishop was forced to flee to Ramla and never come back: GILL 1992, p. 324.

²⁴ GIL 1992, p. 349.

²⁵ For the history of Ashqelon during the Crusade period see LANGÉ 1965, pp. 67-71; for the city walls PRINGLE – BUCKINGHAM 2014.

²⁶ DAJANI – SHAKEEL 1988, p. 62; CLINE 2017, p. 225 and there further references.

²⁷ PRINGLE 1984; PRINGLE 1993, pp. 61-62.

²⁸ LE STRANGE 1890, p. 402.

²⁹ See TALMON – HELLER – KEDAR – REITER 2016, p. 196 with further references.

³⁰ TALMON-HELLER – KEDAR – REITER 2016, pp. 182-215.

³¹ D'ARVIEUX – LABAT 1735, 72. On the French traveler in general see Parlea 2015.

³² The list includes: Beit Gubrin, Baishan, Sebastia, Nikopolis, Lydda, Antipatris, Caesarea, Samaria, Panea, Azotus, Gophna, Petra, Hada (a suburb of Jerusalem), Jerusalem, Tiberias, Sepphoris, Aina d-Gader, and Jaffa. RUSSELL 1980; AMIRAN – ARIEH – TURCOTTE 1994, 265.

³³ At Zoora (modern Ghores Safi, Jordan) in the Negev desert, three Greek funeral inscriptions mourn the deaths of people killed by the earthquake: Slinthia (38 years old) and her daughter Kyra; Obbe, a young girl 15 years old; the archdeacon Samakon, 40 years old. See MEIMARIS – KRITIKAKOU 2016, nn. 22-24.

³⁴ BAR-NATHAN – GANOR 2021, pp. 127-128.

ly left until the Byzantine period and beyond; in contrast, the so-called *bouleuterion/odeon*, to the south of the basilica, continued to be used until the 5th – early 6th century CE.³⁵ After that, the *cavea* was dismantled and overbuilt by a new Byzantine complex, probably domestic in nature, which also reused *kurkar* sandstone blocks taken from the *odeon* itself.³⁶

Byzantine Ashqelon was a prosperous, lively and crowded city, surrounded by several agricultural estates, providing wine and goods to the city and other areas by ship transport.³⁷ Ashqelon was an episcopal seat starting in the 4th century as testified by Longinus in 321 and then by the bishop Sabinus, who took part in the Nicaea Council in 325;³⁸ contemporarily, the city's first churches were built.³⁹ They seem not to reuse *spolia*, while architectural elements, such as capitals,⁴⁰ columns of Proconnesus marble and chancel screens were explicitly imported for these new buildings. This phenomenon can be observed in the church in Barne'a excavated in 1954 by Y. Ory and dated to the 4th century (fig. 3).⁴¹

The Byzantine period seems to have been the start of a new phase for the civic center of the city. Its new and different function – so far not completely understood – caused the abandonment of the basilica and its dismantlement, as was also the fate of other similar buildings in the region⁴². Several productive areas from this period have been identified, but they are either located outside the city wall, in the inland or in the north, beyond the wall in the so-called Barne'a area.⁴³ As a matter of fact, it is known that several manufacturing activities were not allowed in the city, but only outside, such as pottery kilns, glassmakers and business of marinade preparation, as prescribed by the architect Julian in his treatise.⁴⁴ The architect was born in Ashqelon and

³⁵ BOEHM – MASTER – LE BLANC 2016, pp. 313-315.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 315.

³⁷ See GIDEON 2014, pp. 98-99.

³⁸ For the list of the Bishops see RELAND 1714, pp. 530-531; GELZER – HILGENFELD – CUNTZ 1898, pp. 10-11, 62, 81, 99, 12, 191. A second 5th century church was excavated by Tzeferis, who found a mosaic with an inscription dated to the last decade of said century. TZEFERIS 1967, pp. 125-126; BAGATTI 1974, pp. 249-252.

³⁹ See BOEHM 2015, pp. 167-168.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the capital at fig. 17a which dates to 5th-6th century CE.

⁴¹ Excavations have never been published. Data are provided by OVADIAH 1970, p. 22 and BAGATTI 1974, 243-244. A second church, in the same area was excavated by Tzaferis, who unearthed the mosaic with the inscription. TZAferis 1967; TZAferis 1971; BAGATTI 1974, pp. 249-251. The church was built approximately 3.3 km north from the Roman basilica.

⁴² See, for example, the basilica in Hippos, Sebaste, Sepphoris and Nysa-Scythopolis. For an overview see SHKOLNIK 2020. For Hippos, EISENBERG forthcoming; for Sebaste REISNER – FISCHER – LYON 1924, 214-217; for Sepphoris WEISS – MILLER forthcoming; for Nysa-Scythopolis see TSAFRIR – FOERSTER 1997, pp. 96, 115.

⁴³ Barne'a is the area north of the National Park, where the ancient settlement and the city wall lie. In the last fifty decades, Barne'a has been intensively urbanized, and consequently several haphazard excavations were conducted, see DELL'ACQUA 2021a with further references. The most extensive ancient estate is the so-called Third Mile Estate. See ISRAEL – ERICKSON-GINI 2013.

⁴⁴ Hex. 15, 19 and 22. The text of the treatise has been transmitted in the *Hexabiblos*, a handbook of laws by Constantine Armenopulos, a 14th century jurist from Thessaloniki. Quotations of the treatise

wrote its treatise presumably in the third decade of the 6th century CE.⁴⁵ Architectural rules and prescriptions contained in the treatise were designed for Ashqelon and other Palestinian cities.⁴⁶

In no place of the treatise, the architect prescribes or refers to the use of second-hand or reused architectural material, instead Vitruvius (*De Arch.* II, 8,19) at least recommends the reuse of *veteres tegulae* as bricks. However, it is in this general urban context that the first evidence of *spolia* can be set, namely a Proconnesus block, initially used as an architrave,⁴⁷ and later recycled for a Greek inscription (fig. 4),⁴⁸ likely collected and stored from the debris of collapsed Roman buildings. The text is a simple acclamation of Ashqelon and Rome that wishes both cities prosperity:⁴⁹

αὖξι Ἀσκάλ[ων]
αὖξι Ρώ-
μη

The text is set within a plain medallion, flanked by two acanthus leaves, carved on the original upper surface of the block. This was sawed off and adapted to the new function, even if the original ornamental bands, separated by beads and reels, are partially visible on one side (fig. 5). Whereas the block was first carved during the Severan period, the chronology of the text is controversial and general dated to the byzantine period (fourth to sixth century CE).⁵⁰ However, the style of acanthus leaves find comparisons with vegetal decorations on 5th– early 6th century CE marble artifacts: for example, the pulvini made for the church of St. John the Evangelist in Ravenna (430-445 CE);⁵¹ the capital surmounted the column erected in honor of Leo I (457-474);⁵² Justinian capitals in Haghia Sophia in Istanbul.⁵³ The political message of the text leads to hypothesize a public display of the block, in the context of a public building, and consequently a likely official commission.

are cross-referenced by the numbers given in Book 2, part 4, of the Hexabiblos as Hex. See SALIOU 1996, pp. 12-21; DI ROCCO 2015 for the Italian edition. For other sources of the treatise see HAKIM 2001, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵ See GEIGER 1992, followed by VAN DER WAL – LOKIN 1985.

⁴⁶ Interesting is, for example, Julian's prescription related to the view of a public painting (Hex. 49): this testifies that paintings on walls, whether private or public, were common in Ashqelon and other Palestinian cities.

⁴⁷ British Mandate registration no. 47-7398, IAA inv. No 1951-140. Measures: height max 51 cm; largeness 34 cm, depth 73 cm max. ECK 2014a, no. 2334, pp. 270-271 and there further references.

⁴⁸ The exact find spot is unknown. It was collected during the British excavations in 1920-1922. First edition HOGART 1922, p. 22, nt. 3.

⁴⁹ In general, on acclamation in Late Antiquity see ROUECHÉ 1984. Instead of “advance”, I prefer to translate αὖξι with “prosperity” as ILAN 2012, p. 538 did with a similar acclamation on an inscription from Thesalonica («Prosper Neapolis with those who love you»).

⁵⁰ FEISSEL 2006, p. 227 nt. 726. BOEHM – MASTER – LE BLANC 2016, pp. 313-314 suggest dating to the fourth to the sixth century CE.

⁵¹ NOVARA – SARASINI 2001, pp. 81-105 figs. 2b, 4d, 5a-b; ZANOTTO 2007, pp. 90-111 tav. 3-8.

⁵² PESCHLOW 1986; BARSANTI – PARIBENI 2018, p. 30, fig. 11.

⁵³ BARSANTI – PARIBENI 2018, fig. 61; about the capitals of Haghia Sophia RUSSO 2012.

A second piece of evidence is a portion of a Greek inscription engraved on a cut marble column, found in the context of a monumental public building on the northern slope of the south tell, still in use and renovated during the Fatimid period.⁵⁴ This is the case of a double reuse: firstly, the original column was cut and sawed off for engraving the inscription, whose chronology spans between the 4th and the 7th century CE; later, the epigraph was broken and reused in the Fatimid period (9th-10th century).

The general nature of the text did not allow to assign it to a specific community of the city (whether Jewish or Christian), while certainly Jewish is a further Greek inscription engraved on the lower part of a second-hand⁵⁵ marble column – currently in Tel Aviv – set for the salvation of *Menamus*, his wife *Matrona* and their son *Samulus* (fig. 6).⁵⁶

Recent, excavations inside the basilica unearthed remains of a square structure, dated to the Abbasid period, built with blocks of pavonazetto columns and corinthian capitals aligned in a row (fig. 7).⁵⁷

The easier way to come by squared marble slabs or plain blocks was to cut stones originally meant to be used as entablatures, as well as using the sculptural pilasters. Two of them were found during British excavations in the *odeon*, one (the Nike with palm) lying on the marble *opus sectile* floor, the other (the Nike with atlas bearing a globe) west of the previous one, leaning partially on the south wall of the basilica.⁵⁸ Whereas the last one is still complete, the first one has been cut (fig. 8), as other pilasters (fig. 9), and was only identified thanks to parts of the figure.

Marble slabs were already used for the flooring of the mosque in the 10th century, as witnessed by al-Muqaddasī:⁵⁹ It is uncertain whether ‘Abd al-Mail Ibn Marwān (685-705) was the patron of the mosque – which in 1153 was converted into a church dedicated to St. Paul,⁶⁰ or the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir (1035-1094) was the benefactor.

In 1355, the traveler Ibn Batūtah saw the ruins of the city, the mosque/church of St. Paul, which initially hosted the head of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet;⁶¹ south of it, there was a second large mosque called the Mosque of ‘Omar, at that time already in ruins, but some columns were still standing, some had fallen.⁶²

⁵⁴ The epigraph was reused in the floor in the Fatimid period. The text refers to a donation for a building and says: «[...] for the repose of Barouchios [...] and Sabina and their [...]». See BOEHM 2015.

⁵⁵ The column was cut or sawed and turned up down. This proves that the inscription was engraved on a second-hand material and not meant to be read on the top of the shaft.

⁵⁶ *CIIP*, III, pp. 257-258, n. 2322, and there further references. The inscription is dated to 6th-7th century. The editor wrongly interpreted as the top part of the shaft; however the shape of the torus is typical of the lower part of a column, while the top part usually is carved with a smaller and rounded torus. See other similar Proconnesus columns in DELL’ACQUA 2021a.

⁵⁷ BAR-NATHAN – GANOR 2021, pp. 127-128.

⁵⁸ GARSTANG 1924, p. 28.

⁵⁹ «ʿAskalan on the sea is a fine city, and strongly garrisoned. Fruit is here in plenty, especially that of the sycamore tree, of which all are free to eat [...] The mosque stands in the market of the clothes-merchants, and is paved throughout with marble [...] only its harbor is unsafe [...]». al-Muqaddasī translated by LE STRANGE 1890, p. 401.

⁶⁰ PRINGLE 1993, p. 62.

⁶¹ TALMON – HELLER – KEDAR – REITER 2016.

⁶² Ibn Batūtah translated by LE STRANGE 1890, p. 402; GIBB 1956, p. 81.

The most impressive case of reuse still visible in Ashqelon is the city walls.⁶³ As early as 1875, Conder reported that

In the Itinerary of Richard I we find it mentioned that the builders erected their towers upon ancient foundations, and we find that all along its huge walls great columns of syenite, 15 to 20 feet long and 3 feet diameter, have been built into the masonry as through-bonds. Such was indeed the constant practice of Crusaders.⁶⁴

In several sections of the curtain walls and the tower close to the Jerusalem Gate, column shafts are visible protruding from the wall (fig. 10). Due to the numerous building phases from the Byzantine to the Medieval period, the chronology is complex.⁶⁵ In the summer of 2014, excavations were conducted at the so-called Snake Tower: They revealed that the Fatimids not only reused antique granite column drums for shallow foundations in the 10th century, but that they also reinforced the rounded tower with radially placed columns during the 12th century (fig. 11).⁶⁶

Several granite columns have been found in Ashqelon National Park: Some are recycled in the walls, many others scattered around. It is also possible to discern two types: one made of Troad granite from Asia Minor and a reddish granite one from Aswan. So far – not counting the reused ones – a preliminary list includes 90 items of the first type⁶⁷ and 13 of the second⁶⁸. Hypothetically, columns supporting imported marble capitals could have flanked colonnaded streets, erected between the second half of the 2nd century CE and the beginning of the following one.⁶⁹

After the 13th century, the city of Ashqelon was finally abandoned;⁷⁰ however, the site and small villages around were not depopulated. The historical importance and the mark it left of its ancient glory survived across the centuries, leading many travelers to visit the ruins, approaching the site by ship or land.⁷¹ At the time of the first modern visits, the so-called Tel Ashqelon – the area enclosed by the wall – was being used for orchards and plantations;⁷² but several ruins were still standing and visible. Most likely, slabs of pavonazzetto were “quarried” at Ashqelon, by sawing-off columns and pilasters, and were then sent to Akko for the inner decoration of the mosque,

⁶³ The dating of the Ashqelon city walls has always been a controversial issue. See KEDAR – MOOK 1978, pp. 173-175 for previous publications. The authors also made an attempt to date the walls to Late Antiquity or early Middle Ages on the basis of a radiocarbon analysis of the mortar.

⁶⁴ CONDER 1875, p. 154.

⁶⁵ After a Byzantine sea raid in 685 CE, the city was fortified, becoming one of the most important *thughur* (border cities). See MASARWA 2006, pp. 148-151; SHARON 1997, 132-133.

⁶⁶ PRINGLE – BUCKINGHAM 2014, p. 215. See also PRINGLE 2019; BUCKINGHAM – PRINGLE 2019; PRINGLE 2019b; PRINGLE – HEALY – RAMSEY 2019 for the newest data.

⁶⁷ This also includes some fragments currently in Afridar.

⁶⁸ Conservative estimate.

⁶⁹ See DELL'ACQUA 2021a.

⁷⁰ See HOFFMAN 2019, p. 5.

⁷¹ See GREENHALGH 2017, pp. 225-228; DELL'ACQUA 2021a.

⁷² As witnessed by the survey of the Palestine Exploration Fund in the last quarter of the 19th century. CONDER 1875; CONDER – KITCHENER 1883, pp. 237-241.

which Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar had built there in the last decade of the 18th century.⁷³ In this regard, a short passage of William Wittman's travel diary, written while he was staying along the Levantine coast, is worth being quoted. Traveling with the Turkish army, he had the chance to visit Ashqelon a few years after al-Jazzar's plundering:

We were told by several of the inhabitants who came to the camp, that this place contained a great variety of fragments of columns, cornices, and other architectural ornaments of beautiful marble, which Djazzar Pacha had attempted to remove some years before, but had been prevented by the inhabitants.⁷⁴

The 19th century was catastrophic for the ruins of Ashqelon and its architectural heritage. First, there was the expedition led by Lady Stanhope in 1815. The sole purpose was to unearth treasure, which she never ended up finding. Her only success was finding a cuirassed statue, which she proceeded to have destroyed and thrown into the sea.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Mohammed Aga, member of the expedition,

found his own purposes answered in the number of marble slabs that were discovered. These he shipped, in a coasting boat, for Jaffa.⁷⁶

The results of Lady Stanhope's excavations were seen by the explorer, egyptologist and collector Williams Bankes whose memoirs were published by Giovanni Finati,⁷⁷ but the most shocking description is the one given by Michaud and Poujoulat in their correspondence (1830-1831)

*c'est un air de désolation, un caractère de destruction solennelle qui atteste le bouleversement le plus complet.*⁷⁸

Since Lady Stanhope employed three hundred workers for fifteen days, it couldn't have been very different.⁷⁹

Between 1832-1840, the rule of the egyptian Ibrahim Pasha led to the ruins being extensively plundered in order to quarry material and to build a new military base called New Ashqelon, as reported by the Scottish landscape artist David Roberts:

the ground to be extensively cleared, and the results was the discovery of several magnificent ruins, and among the rest the ground-plan of a Temple, of which some columns remain, each of a single piece of granite, with an entablature, and capitals and marble finely executed

⁷³ Pavonazetto slabs are visible inside the so-called White Mosque for the revetment of the wall. Since this lithotype is unknown elsewhere in the region, the provenance from Ashqelon is plausible, but can only be proven by testing samples from both sites. Al-Jazzar looting activity in Ashqelon is reported in the diary of Lady Stanhope (MERYON 1846, p. 167).

⁷⁴ WITTMAN 1803, p. 261.

⁷⁵ Lady Stanhope's actions are recounted by her doctor. MERYON 1846, pp. 152-169.

⁷⁶ MERYON 1846, p. 163.

⁷⁷ FINATI 1830.

⁷⁸ MICHAUD – POUJOLAT 1841, p. 83.

⁷⁹ The number is given by MICHAUD – POUJOLAT 1841, p. 83.

in the Corinthian order.⁸⁰

However, antiquities did not only continue to be plundered by European explorers or foreign governors. Even the local population contributed to loot the ancient city. The most valuable source is a report published by Gottlieb Schumacher in 1886. Entering the site from the north, he immediately saw traces of robbery in the city wall, tunneled by locals for excavating slabs and other antiquities. Even though the government had forbidden excavations,

every suitable marble piece is transported as it is, or, in case of considerable weight, sawn into portable slabs and sold to Gaza and Jaffa, to be placed over the entrances of private buildings.⁸¹

The American engineer was also a direct witness to locals sawing stone into pieces: he describes a group of locals committed to cutting marble pedestals, found almost 5 m below the surface, very similar to the ones currently in open air Museum in the Ashqelon National Park (fig. 12).⁸² The operation took place close to the well-built sandstone southern wall, namely the area where the British excavations (1920-1922), directed by John Garstang, found a deposit of scattered architectural and sculptural elements. Pictures taken at that time show various items found all in secondary and third use, some of them in the orchestra of the *odeon*. Other pieces were found inside wells, others above and north of the southern wall of the basilica.

The impression is that during the 19th century, this area became a deposit of marble blocks, ready to be cut, reduced in sized, and sliced. A comparable case is that of *Caesarea Maritima*, where the theater, which had been transformed into a Byzantine fortress, was later filled with columns, marble blocks and statues, probably also collected elsewhere in the city and stocked there to be burned and calcinated.⁸³

Several blocks show signs of sawing, some of them left *in situ*, like a block from a heart-shaped pilaster made of pavonazzetto (fig. 13). In another case, a second pilaster had been partially sawed off and then abandoned (fig. 14).⁸⁴

Preferably, pedestals of proconnesus, pavonazzetto columns and sculptural pilasters were recycled after having been sliced and reduced to smaller pieces; capitals, on the contrary, were left whole. A group of Proconnesus blocks (shaft, architraves and fragments of capitals) features marks of reuse: They were most likely reused for lifting buckets from wells (figg. 15a-d). Another block of architrave shows signs of reuse (figg. 16a-b). Its original location – as well as its find-spot – is unknown, but it was probably part of the façade of a building due to the small size. Stylistically dated to

⁸⁰ ROBERTS 1855, II, no pages. Caption to Plate 57.

⁸¹ SCHUMACHER 1886, p. 172.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ FROVA 1965, 212. Also, in Caesarea, the local population started to sell antiquities after the Turkish government installed a camp for the Muslims refugees from the Balkans here in 1884. BENZINGER 1891, p. 71; OLIPHANT 1887, p. 187; FISCHER 1998, pp. 290-291.

⁸⁴ The block was found in the same position during Garstang's excavation, as visible in a picture taken in 1920.

the Severan period,⁸⁵ after the Roman period, the block was cut, recycled and a cavity was carved into it. Some Greek letters are engraved on the upper surface: *Epsilon* and *k* are probably to be interpreted as the Greek preposition *ek* (meaning *from*), below a *delta*, on the right corner a symbol, probably a *delta* with a cross below. The swastika is the result of an ancient act of christianization, likely in the Byzantine period.⁸⁶ Whereas the letters most likely were engraved in the context of the block first positioning,⁸⁷ the cutting and the cavity are also probably related to the modern phase of reuse.

Some proconnesus blocks (fig. 17b), 5th-6th century Byzantine capitals (fig. 17a), and a selection of pavonazetto columns (fig. 17c) can nowadays be seen in the mosque in Majdal, a neighborhood of modern Ashqelon – formerly an Arab village until 1948, the origin of which is debated.⁸⁸ It must have been built atop the Ancient city at least in the 13th century.⁸⁹ In the second half of the 19th century, travellers wrote enthusiastically about this village, which they claimed to be comparable to «one of the richest parts of England».⁹⁰

The Itinéraire de l'Orient, published in 1861 by Di Adolphe and Isambert, reports that Majdal is a big village, «Les maisons son ten pierre, les matériaux précieux d'Ascalon sont entrés dans leur contruction comme dans celle de la mosquée».⁹¹

CONCLUSIONS

The dismantling of Roman Ashqelon was a slow process from the Byzantine period until the 13th century. For about four centuries, it partially stopped, or more accurately slowed down, due to depopulation. Since the late 18th century, and during the 19th century it started up again with more intensity.

In Ashqelon, this phenomenon can be divided into three macro-periods. It started already in the Byzantine period, both as the consequence of the earthquake and as part of the normal process of urban renovation, which took place regularly over the years; however, for unfortunate reasons,⁹² archaeological evidence has so far not yet provided evidence of relevant phases of *spolia* use, such as the recently excavated temple on the *decumanus* in Sepphoris, the debris of which was reused in the church built on the

⁸⁵ FISCHER 1995, p. 126, fig. 7 believed the block was part of the inner decoration of the basilica; *ver-sus* BOHEM – MASTER – LE BLANC 2016, p. 316, fig. 22c who associated it with *the scaenae frons* of the bouleterion/odeum.

⁸⁶ Eck 2014b retains the swastika an act of modern vandalism. However, this symbol was largely used as decoration during the Byzantine period. Recently a swastika engraved on a column was found in Hippos Sussita (personal communication of Michael Eisenberg).

⁸⁷ The practice of engraving numbers and signs as help for the positioning of the block is widely attested and examples have also been found in Ashqelon. See in general MARSILI 2016b with further references; for Ashqelon see CII/P 2014, no. 2337; 2338; DELL'ACQUA 2021a.

⁸⁸ KOUCKY 2008, pp. 17-19.

⁸⁹ PRINGLE 2019a, 124.

⁹⁰ MURREY 1858, p. 272.

⁹¹ DI ADOLPHE – ISAMBERT 1861, p. 852.

⁹² Unpublished excavations, even after decades, are the main issues.

same plot.⁹³ It is likely that columns plundered from Roman buildings were recycled in Byzantine churches, which nowadays no longer stand or have yet to be excavated, like the so-called church of St. Mary the Green,⁹⁴ close to the Jerusalem Gate or other ones known only through 18th century sources.⁹⁵

The second macro-phase spans the Islamic period to the time of the Crusaders. The most visible evidence is the reuse of columns in the city wall and the fortification system. It has been stated that this is «a peculiarly Eastern manifestation of the desire to beautify as well as strengthen fortresses».⁹⁶

It begun as structural and become decorative.⁹⁷ In Ashqelon, column shafts were recycled both in foundations and on higher levels, where their original function becomes irrelevant. In this respect, the process of reuse observed here fits well the general trend widely noticed in the East, for example at the Mamluk mosque of al-Qayqan in Aleppo, where they have been interpreted as talismans and magic *spolia*.⁹⁸

The last phase is a more modern one, when the local population and travelers plundered antiquities for economic purposes. Between the late 17th and the 18th century, the spread of *spolia* reached its peak: marble blocks and columns were not only taken to Madjal and sold to the nearby city of Gaza, but also sent north, to Jaffa and Akko, to decorate private houses and mosques, to be used as wells and for pulley systems.

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⁹³ WEISS 2010.

⁹⁴ The church was excavated by the Leon Levy expedition but only partially published. It is dated to the 5th century, with a renovation phase during the time of the Crusaders. Here, four granite columns still stand. See TZAFERIS – STAGER 2008; PEERS 2009. The identification is controverted. See HOFFMAN 2019, p. 38 with further references.

⁹⁵ For the collection of sources see DELL'ACQUA 2021a.

⁹⁶ GREENHALGH 1999, p. 786.

⁹⁷ See the Gate of Victory (Bâb al-Nasr) in Aleppo. GONNELLA 2010, fig. 9.

⁹⁸ GONNELLA 2010, pp. 111-112. On the phenomenon of the spolia in Muslim architectures, see FLOOD 2001; FLOOD 2006; LIC 2013.

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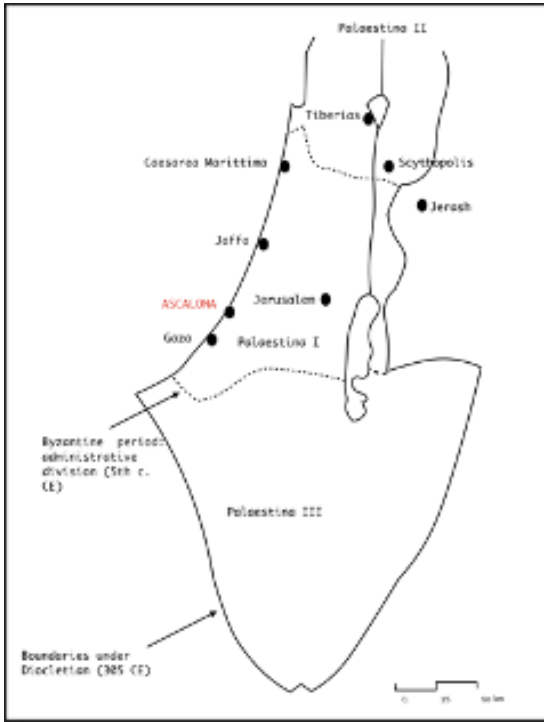


fig. 1. Map of Palestine between the Late Antiquity and Byzantine Period (author).

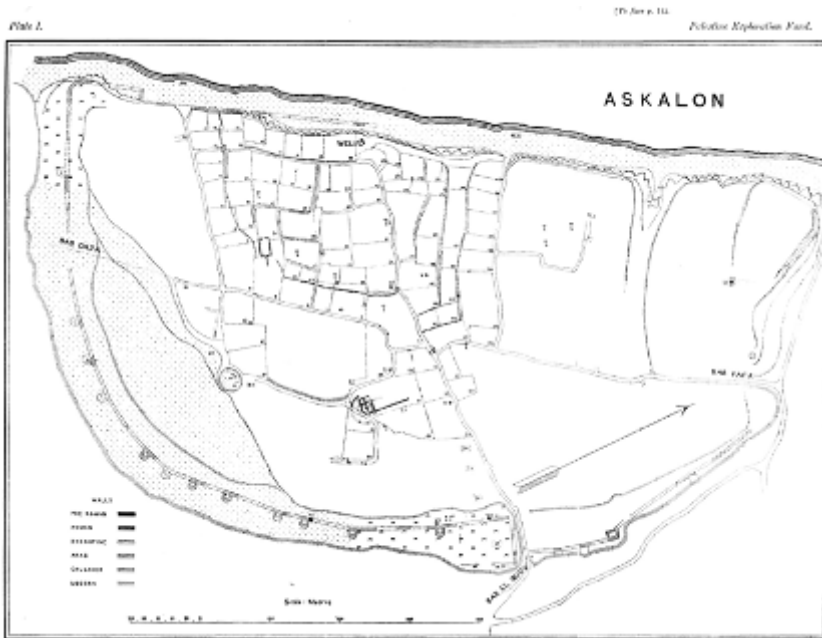


fig. 2. Plan of the area originally occupied by ancient Ashqelon (after Garstang 1922, plate 1).



fig. 3. Ashqelon National Park and the location of the church excavated by Ory in the Barne'a area.



fig. 4. Block of a marble architrave reused in Byzantine period with inscription.



fig. 5. Block of a marble architrave reused in Byzantine period with inscription, view of the side



fig. 6. Marble column with Greek Inscription set for the salvation of Menamus, his wife Matrona and their son Samulus (Rockefeller Museum, IAA, inv. no. I-9297).



fig. 7. View of the central area of the Basilica after recent excavations, from north-east (photo taken in January 2019)



fig. 8. Top part of a figural pilaster depicting Isis, sawed off (photo author, 2019).



fig. 9. Portion of a figural pilaster sawed off (photo author, 2019).



fig. 10. Column shaft used to reinforce the city walls toward the sea (photo author, June 2019).



fig. 11. Granite column shaft employed in the tower closed to the Jerusalem Gate (photo author, June 2019).

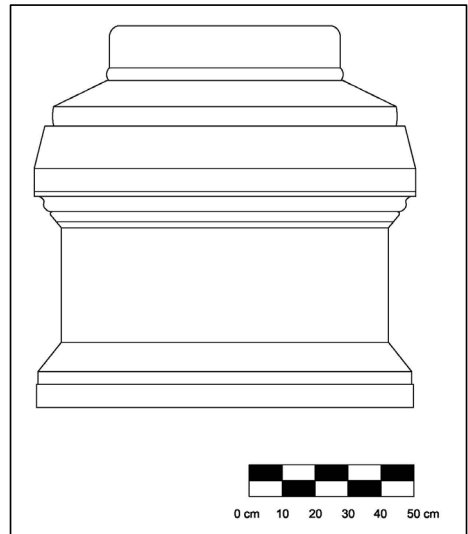


fig. 12a-b. Marble pedestal partially sawed off, Ashkelon National Park, (photo author June 2019, drawing F. Grossi).



fig. 13. Huge pavonazzetto heart-shaped pilaster, sawed off and abandoned, (photo author 2019).



Fig. 14. Portion of a pavonazzetto heart-shaped pilaster, partially sawed off and abandoned, (photo author 2019).



Fig. 15. Marble artifacts (column and architrave) reused for lifting buckets from wells (photo author 2019).

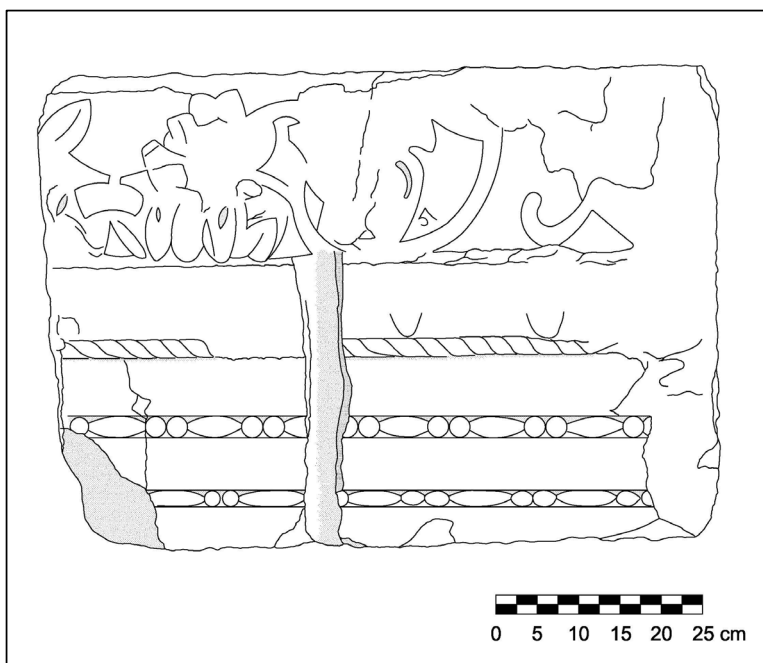


fig. 16a-b. Entablature block with signs of reuse on the upper surface (photo author 2019, drawing F. Grossi).



fig. 17a-c. Architectural artifacts reused in the mosque in Majdal, Ashkelon (photo author 2019).