

## RECENT DISCOVERIES AT ASHKELON

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The Leon Levy Expedition, under the direction of Prof. Lawrence Stager of Harvard University, has recently made some important discoveries at the site of ancient Ashkelon, which is located 40 miles south of Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean coast.\* Since 1985, annual excavations have been conducted there by a team of professional archaeologists (of which I am a member), together with students of archaeology and several dozen enthusiastic volunteers. Most of the latter are American college students, but amateur archaeologists of all ages and several nationalities have joined us over the years in digging up Ashkelon. Our efforts have been rewarded by the discovery of exciting finds, large and small, that reveal much about the life and history of the city and its inhabitants.

One of the more striking discoveries of recent years is a lengthy Arabic inscription, unearthed in 1993, that was carved into a large limestone slab measuring 5 feet long and 2 feet wide. The inscription—21 lines long and executed in a sophisticated, highly professional script, decorated with barbs and “swallow tails”—bears a date of March 2nd, A.D. 1150, and it commemorates the erection of a tower by the Egypt-based Fatimid rulers of the

city, which was then called “Ascalon.” In 1150, the fortifications of Ascalon, whose population at that time numbered 12,000–15,000, were strengthened by its Muslim inhabitants to defend against the marauding Crusaders. Fifty-three towers, some of them still visible today, punctuated the massive stone ramparts of Islamic Ascalon. Ironically, the stone-carved Arabic inscription that describes the building of one of these towers also bears the marks of the failure of Ascalon’s defenses, because it was found smashed into several pieces and lying in the bottom of the dry moat that encircled the city. On top of the beautiful Arabic inscription were gouged no fewer than five heraldic shields, clearly the work of a Crusader sometime after the capture of Ascalon in 1153. Three years after

the inscription was written the wealthy city fell—but only after a long, seven-month siege mounted by the Crusaders under King Baldwin III of Jerusalem, who had to muster all of the forces available to him in order to accomplish the task.

Thanks to the detective work of Prof. Moshe Sharon of the Hebrew University, a specialist in medieval Palestine, we think we know the identity of the victorious Crusader whose shield was carved over the Arabic inscription. He was an English knight from Lincolnshire named Hugh Wake, whose lineal descendant (also a knight) is alive today. Through his heraldic shield, Sir Hugh announces to posterity his presence far from home in medieval Ascalon. Prof. Sharon traced the shield design on the inscription to Hugh Wake by studying medieval English heraldry.

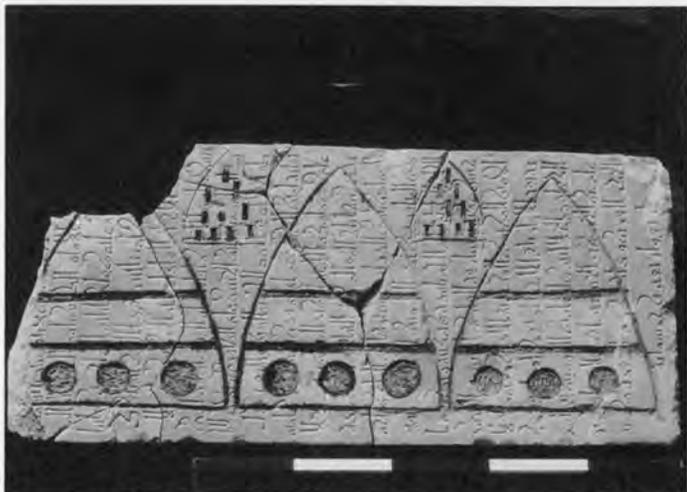
The three larger shields carved over the inscription are described in heraldic terminology as having two bars (or *barrulets*), known as “bars-gemel,” and three “roundels” in the “chief” (i.e., the top panel of the shield). A shield of this design is attested for the Wake family of England as early as the thirteenth century, and Sir Hugh Wake himself is known from records dating to the reign of Henry I (1100–1135). The discovery of his shield at



*The author in situ*

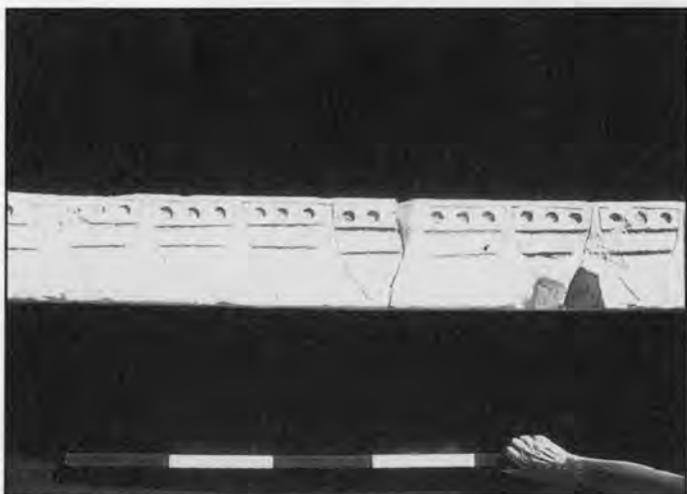
Ashkelon has had the unintended effect of confirming the pedigree of the Wake family that lives in England today, the antiquity of whose genealogy had recently been disputed.

The carving of his shield over the Islamic inscription was not simply an act of vandalism by Sir Hugh, however. In 1994 we found, in the same moat, a heavy marble lintel from a doorway, in which were carved eight shields—again, the heraldic device of Hugh Wake! Here, as on the stone inscription, the shields were incised carefully and neatly, and the grooves were filled in with a red pigment that has survived to this day. Perhaps Sir Hugh and his retinue were responsible for rebuilding Ascalon’s defenses at this spot, near the northern or “Jaffa”



**Arabic inscription with Crusader shields carved on top** gate of the city. He was therefore entitled to carve his insignia into the architecture, where it was meant to endure. It seems, then, that with respect to the Arabic inscription, Sir Hugh's primary intention was not to deface and destroy it (he certainly could not have read it, in any case). Rather, he wished—assuming that the inscription was still in place and intact in the wall of the tower when he had his shield carved into it—to register his presence and authority in this part of Ascalon.

In that case, how did both the stone inscription and the lintel end up in pieces in the moat, where we found them? The answer lies in the checkered history of medieval Ascalon, which returned to Muslim hands after the famous Battle of Hittin on July 4th, 1187, in which an army led by Saladin vanquished the Crusaders. But with the arrival of Richard the Lion-heart and the forces of the Third Crusade a few years later, in 1191, Muslim control of Ascalon became precarious once again. Saladin lost Acre and was defeated again by Richard at the Battle of Arsuf, in September 1191. Fearful of Crusader naval power and worried that Richard might retake Ascalon, Saladin ordered the systematic destruction of the strategically located city, depriving his enemies (as well as himself) of a powerful base in southern Palestine that controlled the approaches to Egypt. It may have been during this demoli-



**Marble lintel with Crusader shields**

tion that the inscribed limestone slab and the marble lintel, with their Crusader insignia, were cast into the moat.

A year later, in 1192, Richard the Lion-heart took possession of the abandoned site of Ascalon, and he immediately rebuilt it as a military fortress. Now, because Ascalon was captured and rebuilt more than once, it is possible that the English knight whose insignia we have found was not involved in the original Crusader conquest of Ascalon in 1153 but was a member of Richard the Lion-heart's later expedition—or was a participant in an even later Crusade in 1241 under the Earl of Cornwall, who also refortified Ascalon. If our man arrived on the scene in 1192 or 1241, he would have been a descendant of the Sir Hugh Wake we know from English sources of the early twelfth century, and his handiwork may have been destroyed as late as 1270, when the Mamluk sultan Baybars demolished Ascalon for the last time, filling in its harbor and leaving it desolate. In any case, the Arabic inscription and the Crusader shields carved over it give us a unique view of the events surrounding the turbulent final phase in the long history of the city.



**Stone glacis of Islamic Ascalon**

From the last days of Ashkelon in the medieval period, we leap back 3,000 years to the Bronze Age, simply by moving a few hundred yards away from the well-preserved Islamic moat and glacis to the equally impressive mudbrick gate and ramparts that were erected shortly after 2000 B.C., during the Canaanite period. The site may have been occupied earlier, but the Canaanites of the Middle Bronze Age gave Ashkelon its enduring form by erecting huge earthworks around the site. Over the past few years, an enormous amount of dirt has been moved—much of it by hand!—in order to uncover these earthworks, on top of which we found the oldest known arched gateway in the world. The top of the arch collapsed in antiquity (which explains why the gate was filled in, thereby preserving it until now), but the dimensions of the ancient city entrance can be determined and its original appearance reconstructed. The gateway is more than 8 feet wide—easily accommodating a Bronze Age chariot—and had a vertical clearance of at least 12 feet. It is flanked by mudbrick towers that are preserved today to a height of almost 20 feet, indicating that a second story (and possibly a third) was constructed over the gateway. The mudbrick gate collapsed and was re-

built several times over the course of the Middle Bronze Age, from 2000–1550 B.C. In its earliest phase, the arched passageway through the gate was so long, from its point of entry on outside of the city to its point of exit on the inside, that a stone-lined barrel vault, coated with white plaster, was constructed between the inner and outer arches. This was needed to support the superstructure of the gate, and it is the oldest such vault ever found.

This massive, fortified gateway was only a small part of the defenses of Canaanite Ashkelon. The gate was built into a large mudbrick wall that sat atop a huge earthen rampart, which formed a mile-long semicircle enclosing the entire city—except for the seaward side, which is protected by a natural bluff. Ashkelon seems to have reached its maximum size of 150 acres already in the early second millennium B.C., because the later fortifications, including those of the Hellenistic, Roman, and Islamic periods, follow the line of the Middle Bronze Age rampart. The glacis, or outer face, of the rampart initially consisted of mudbricks, but in a later phase it was constructed of fieldstones sealed with a smooth layer of



**Canaanite ramparts**

clay. By 1550 B.C., the continuously rebuilt rampart had reached a height of 50 feet and was 70 feet thick at its base, with a steep, 40-degree slope on its outer face. It was therefore a formidable defense against attackers, who could storm the walls or tunnel through the rampart only with great difficulty.

During the Canaanite period, a roadway more than 20 feet in width ascended the rampart from the nearby harbor and entered the gate at the top. Along this street, near the bottom of the outer slope, we found a structure containing a spectacular find. This is a finely crafted bronze statuette of a bull calf, originally covered with silver, which is 4 inches long and 4 inches high, and weighs almost a pound. A ceramic model shrine, complete with a miniature doorway, was found with it. From other sources we know that images of calves and bulls are associated with the worship of the Canaanite gods El and Baal. Moreover, certain passages in the Old Testament speak harshly against calf worship, which was emblematic of proscribed Canaanite religious practices. We see this, for example, in the story of the “golden calf” that was worshipped by the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus



**Middle Bronze Age Canaanite arched mudbrick gate**

32), and in the writings of the prophet Hosea, who inveighs against the kissing of calf-images (Hosea 13:2). As our discovery makes clear, however, the bull calf was revered as a symbol of deity in Canaanite Ashkelon; and judging by where it was found, its image was probably placed in a wayside sanctuary visited by travelers entering the city along the road leading from the harbor to the gate.

We still know relatively little about the last phase of Canaanite occupation of Ashkelon during the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.). A few years ago, however, we found, in a residential area, a well-preserved burial from that period that contained the skeleton of an adolescent girl. Buried with her were some beautiful pieces of imported pottery, three Egyptian scarabs, and a food-offering in a shallow bowl. At her shoulder were found two toggle pins, used for fastening a garment that has long since decayed. Her tomb consisted of a mudbrick vault that was coated with white plaster. The practice of burying the dead inside the city, often underneath the family home, is well attested from Middle and Late Bronze Age Canaan.

The Philistines conquered Canaanite Ashkelon in ca. 1175 B.C., and throughout the Philistine period Ashkelon flourished as one of the five cities of the Philistine pentapolis and as the

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**Artist's reconstruction of Canaanite fortifications of Ashkelon**



**Canaanite calf image**

main Philistine seaport. Originally of Greek Mycenaean origin, the Philistines, along with other "Sea Peoples," swept across the lands of the eastern Mediterranean shortly after 1200 B.C., displacing the previous inhabitants and carving out their own territory in southern Palestine. We know that they came from the Aegean area because their pottery is closely related to Mycenaean pottery produced during the Late Bronze Age in mainland Greece and the Greek islands. During the earliest period of their occupation of Palestine, the Philistines used local clays to produce a monochrome pottery, decorated



**Late Bronze Age Canaanite burial**

with either red or black paint, that is very similar to the Mycenaean pottery of the Aegean. Later they produced a hybrid, bichrome pottery painted in both red and black that contains both Mycenaean and Canaanite stylistic features. This what has usually been called "Philistine" pottery, but it really represents the second generation of Philistine habitation in the region. In the small area in which the earliest Philistine occupation of Ashkelon has so far been uncovered, the pottery sequence from monochrome to bichrome has been well demonstrated, giving a vivid picture of the arrival of a new group with foreign antecedents and their gradual acculturation to the styles and techniques found in their new home.

The Aegean origin of the Philistines is shown, not only by their pottery, but also by a large group of nondescript clay cylinders found in the earliest Philistine buildings at Ashkelon. These are loom weights that were used in weaving with a vertical loom, but they are pinched at the waist and unperforated, and so are quite different from local, Canaanite loom weights. They do resemble, however, clay loom weights found at Mycenaean sites in Greece and the Aegean islands. Even these humble artifacts, therefore, reveal the origin of their makers—indeed, they are more telling than pottery, which (theoretically) might have been produced by a small group of non-Philistine potters from the Mycenaean world, whereas the loom weights are so simple to make that we can only imagine that Philistine weavers, resident in a new and foreign country, produced them according to the custom of their Aegean homeland.

At Ashkelon, the Philistines rebuilt the Canaanite rampart and glacis, and near the Middle Bronze Age gate they erected a massive mudbrick tower whose base measures 34 feet by 20 feet. Although the Philistine fortifications have not been traced extensively, it seems that Philistine Ashkelon was as large as Canaanite Ashkelon (150 acres), which is in keeping with what we know of the sophisticated urban culture of the Philistines—so much in contrast to the modern reputation of "philistines" as boors and ignoramuses. Moreover, the power and prosperity of the Philistines of Ashkelon was maintained, except for a short period of Israelite domination under David and Solomon, throughout the Iron Age, until the complete destruction of the city by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 604



**Skeleton of one of Nebuchadnezzar's victims in 604 B.C.**



**Egyptian bronze situlae discovered in 604 B.C. destruction debris**

B.C.—18 years before he did the same to Jerusalem. Although they had long since adopted a Semitic dialect similar to Hebrew, as we know from ostraca (inscribed potsherds) of the late Iron Age found at Ashkelon, it appears that the Philistines retained a sense of their cultural identity throughout their entire history, and even took it with them into their Babylonian exile. Certainly, the pottery manufactured at Ashkelon maintained a distinctive regional character, although it soon lost its links to the Aegean and was fully at home in the Levant.

At the present time, we know the Philistines of Ashkelon best at the moment of their conquest and exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in December of 604 B.C. In the Babylonian Chronicle we read that Nebuchadnezzar

marched to the city of Ashkelon and captured it in the month of Kislev. He captured its king and plundered it and carried off [spoil from it. ...]. He turned the city into a mound [lit. "a tell"] and heaps of ruins and then, in the month of Sebat, he marched back to Babylon.

The destruction of Ashkelon is also described by the prophet Jeremiah (ch. 47).

Archaeologists love a cataclysmic destruction, and much of our effort over the past few years has been devoted to uncovering the ruins of the city that was destroyed by the Babylonians. The debris has turned up many important discoveries, of which the most poignant is the complete skeleton of one of Nebuchadnezzar's victims. Analysis has shown that it is the skeleton of a middle-aged woman whose skull had been crushed by a blunt instrument. Lying on her back, legs and arms akimbo, this woman was buried by the falling walls and roof of the building in which she had taken refuge. Less grisly but equally dramatic evidence of sudden destruction has been found in two widely separated areas of the site, indicating that the Babylonian destruction was widespread and total. An abundance of charred wood and fallen brick bears silent

testimony to the fiery conflagration that engulfed the city. Many smashed pots, crushed by falling walls and roofs, lie on the floors of the houses. Much of the wealth of Ashkelon was no doubt looted or destroyed, but what remains in the ruins is evidence both of the prosperity of the Philistine city and the speed with which it was snuffed out. A number of precious

items were left behind by the fleeing inhabitants: in one building, which seems to have been a winery, excavators found several artifacts of Egyptian character, including a bronze statuette of the god Osiris, seven bronze *situlae* (libation flasks), and a faience plaque depicting the god Bes. The presence of Egyptian artifacts at Ashkelon highlights the strategic rationale for Nebuchadnezzar's scorched-earth policy in southern Palestine, because the Babylonians targeted any potential ally of their great enemy, Egypt.

Paradoxically, the death and destruction wreaked by the Babylonians provides us with an opportunity to reconstruct the lives of Ashkelon's inhabitants on the eve of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest. In one area of excavation, by the sea, we have uncovered what seems to have been a bazaar or marketplace. A row of shops near a small plaza contained a great deal of smashed pottery. In one, wine jars and dipper juglets suggest a wine shop, and in the street outside this shop was found an ostrakon listing "red wine" (*yn 'dm*) and "strong drink" (*škr*)—perhaps date-palm wine. Another shop (the "butcher shop") apparently had contained cuts of meat, including two complete forelegs of cattle. This is indicated by the cut marks on the animal bones found there, according to staff zoöarchaeologist Brian Hesse. Finally, another room (the "accounting office") contained quantities of charred wheat to-

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**Egyptian faience plaque of the god Bes, found in destruction debris of 604 B.C.**



**Plastered Philistine wine-press**

gether with a dozen scale-weights of bronze and stone and pieces of the bronze weighing scales themselves. A nearby ostrakon appears to be a receipt for grain that was paid for with silver. Above the "accounting office" floor, resting on top of the roof debris, the excavators found a small sandstone incense altar—evidence of the rooftop altars referred to by the prophet Jeremiah, who was writing during this period (Jeremiah 32:29). As in the nearby Philistine city of Ekron (Tel Mique), where altars were found in rooms devoted to olive-oil production, there is evidence at Ashkelon for the intertwining of cultic activity and commerce. But it is not surprising to find evidence of mercantile activity at Ashkelon, whose very name is related to the word "shekel" and is attested in Egyptian sources as far back as the Canaanite Middle Bronze Age. The coastal Canaanites and Philistines are known in the Bible as merchants *par excellence*, and a great deal of buying and selling is to be expected in a seaport such as Ashkelon.

Yet Philistine Ashkelon did not simply trade but also produced commodities, as we have learned by excavating the debris of the Babylonian destruction in another area of the site. A Philistine winery has come to light there, consisting of at least three workrooms, alternating with storage magazines. Along with a great many dipper juglets and wine-jars, we found the remains of platforms, vats, and basins lined with cobbles and coated with smooth, waterproof plaster. The best-preserved of these wine-pressing installations shows that they consisted of a shallow, plastered treading-platform with a low rim and a channel on one side that drained into a plastered vat, which had a small sump or catchment basin in its corner. The grape juice collected in the vat while the lees or dregs settled in the sump. The juice was ladled into jars, which were placed in the adjacent storerooms while the wine fermented. Three of these wine-presses were found in the Philistine winery, and there may have been more of them originally. Other evidence of wine-production comes from the unbaked clay balls, similar to loom weights but larger, that were found scattered throughout the winery. Apparently, these were placed in the mouths of the wine-jars as stoppers, but because they were perforated they allowed the gases from the fermenting wine to escape.

After the Babylonian destruction, Ashkelon was abandoned for a while, and then it was resettled by Phoenicians (Canaanites from farther north on the Mediterranean coast) under the suzerainty of the Persians, whose empire succeeded the Neo-Babylonian empire. Much of our earlier archaeological work at Ashkelon, during the 1980s, involved excavating the thick deposits of the Persian period, in which an enormous "dog cemetery" was found, not to mention work done on the Hellenistic, Roman, and Islamic remains that lay above the Persian levels. Important discoveries have been made from all of these periods. For the next few years, however, work will continue on the Iron Age levels of Philistine Ashkelon, which date from ca. 1175–604 B.C., with the intention of gaining a better picture of Philistine life and society in its more prosperous phases, from the period of initial settlement in Canaan until the demise of Philistia. Below the Philistine levels lies the great Canaanite Bronze Age of Ashkelon, of which we know little beyond what the Middle Bronze Age fortifications have revealed. Archaeological work will therefore continue at Ashkelon for some time to come. We have learned much about Ashkelon's various occupants: Philistines and Phoenicians, Muslims and Crusaders; but we would like to know more about all of them—not least the Canaanites, who gave this important site its enduring shape and its name.

#### Note

\*I am grateful to Prof. Lawrence Stager for permission to describe here the results of the Ashkelon excavations. Many of the interpretations of the finds that I have outlined are his.

*All photographs by Carl Andrews*

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**Painted pottery flask from Megiddo, ca. 1000–800 B.C.  
OIP 42**