

About the City

Ashkelon is first mentioned in Egyptian texts dating from the 19th century BC. Its origins date back some 5000 years, and it is considered one of the oldest cities in the world, having been a cradle of human civilisation. Thanks to its unique strategic location, Ashkelon played an important role in the ancient history of the East. The Egyptians recognised its importance, and its conquest is depicted in a relief on the wall of a temple dating from the time of Ramses II. In biblical times, Ashkelon was one of the five major Philistine cities along the coastal plain.

Although the Book of Judges (1:18) states that the tribe of Judah captured Ashkelon, in reality the city remained in Philistine hands. In the days of the Judges, Samson the hero went down to Ashkelon and slew thirty men there (Judges 14:19), and to this day places in Ashkelon are associated with the names of Samson the hero and his Philistine lover, Delilah.

Around 1000 years before the Common Era, when King Saul and his sons fell at Gilboa in their war against the Philistines, David uttered his famous lament: 'The stag of Israel lies slain upon your high places ... Do not tell it in Gath, do not proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult' (2 Samuel 1:19–20).

The name of Ashkelon

The name of Ashkelon is derived from the root 'shekel' and appears in hieroglyphics on a pottery shard in the form 'Askala'.

At Tell el-Amarna in Egypt, tablets containing letters from governors dating from the 14th century BC were discovered, including letters on clay tablets sent by the governor of the occupied Ashkelon to Pharaoh. In his letter, the governor informs Pharaoh that he is guarding the city. He reports that he has prepared provisions for the Egyptian army and is ready to receive the Egyptian agent and obey his orders.

In contrast to the governor of Ashkelon, the governor of Jerusalem complains in his letter to Pharaoh that the inhabitants of Ashkelon had fed the Habiru tribes, Pharaoh's enemies, who had begun to invade Canaan. Scholars of the Chronicles associate the Habiru with the Hebrews, and indeed, during this period the Israelites left Egypt on their way to the land of Canaan.

An Important Port City

Ashkelon has never known peace throughout its history. In the 8th and 7th centuries BC, the kings of Assyria waged wars against Egypt.

Kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal recognised Ashkelon's great strategic importance and turned it into a base for their armies and a transit point for their forces.

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, also seized control of the city, which commanded the sea route, and, in order to suppress its inhabitants' resistance to the conquest, exiled many of them to Babylon. As an important port city, it also attracted people from Tyre, who turned it into a Tyrean trading centre.

In 332 BC, Alexander the Great's army conquered Ashkelon by sea. Under foreign rule, a non-Jewish culture developed in the city and idolatrous worship flourished there. Well-known examples include the temple to the goddess Aphrodite – that is, Astarte – and the worship of the local Baal, known as Heracles.

King Herod

Jews exercised almost no control over Ashkelon in ancient times or during the Biblical period.

During the Hasmonean period, King Alexander Jannaeus ruled it for a short time. King Herod ruled the city for a prolonged period.

According to tradition, Herod was born in Ashkelon (in 37 BC), which is probably why he built magnificent structures there. During excavations carried out in the city by a British archaeological expedition in 1921, the remains of Herod's summer senate house were discovered. A Roman burial complex, known as the Roman Tomb, was also uncovered near the seashore. Its walls are painted in colours that have been preserved to this very day.

During the Roman period, the city was home to a fairly large Jewish community. In the first centuries AD, power struggles and wars raged between its Jewish inhabitants and the non-Jews who ruled the city and its surroundings.

From the Byzantine period, the remains of churches can be found in Ashkelon in what is now the Barnea neighbourhood and in the city's national park. Polished granite columns, bases made of imported marble and other ritual stones have been discovered at various locations throughout the city.

The Conquest of the City

In 1884, a 6th-century mosaic map depicting the Holy Land was discovered in Madaba, Jordan. The map was drawn based on a Roman road map, and Ashkelon is listed amongst the cities marked on it.

When the land was conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the 7th century AD, Ashkelon – which was inhabited by Byzantine Christians – was also captured. During the wars between the Arabs and the Byzantines, the city's grand palaces were destroyed, and the marble stones and columns were used to fortify the walls and lay the foundations of new houses.

The city flourished under Arab rule. The city's Jewish inhabitants lived in peace with the Arabs and maintained good relations with the community in Egypt until the 11th century AD.

They were followed by the Crusaders, who arrived in the Holy Land, and for about a century battles raged between the Muslims and the Crusaders; Ashkelon changed hands repeatedly, and the entire surrounding area became a battlefield.

In 1153, King Baldwin III captured Egyptian Ashkelon after a five-month siege. The Crusaders built a system of fortifications around it, and the remains of the citadel can still be seen there today.

In 1187, the Muslim hero Saladin captured Ashkelon and destroyed the fortifications built there by the Crusaders.

King Richard the Lionheart of England conquered Ashkelon in 1191 following a prolonged siege, and once again fortified its walls and towers.

It was not until 1270 that the Muslims prevailed over the Crusaders. Led by their king, the Mamluk sultan Baybars, who had come from Egypt, they stormed the walls of Ashkelon, breached them and utterly destroyed the city. Ashkelon was reduced to ruins and was left without any inhabitants.

Visitors who came to the city in the 19th century wrote and spoke of its desolation and sketched its ruins.

Ancient Ashkelon has remained in ruins to this day, and no new settlement has been built upon its ruins; only Arab villages have sprung up around it, and to the east of it the town of Majdal was built.

(Translated with DeepL.com)