

drei Schiffe besaß. Nach der ersten Grabungskampagne konnte nicht ausgeschlossen werden, dass die Kirche fünf Schiffe besaß.

Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass die bisherigen Untersuchungen die Rekonstruktion einer dreischiffigen Basilika und eines angrenzenden, etwas breiteren Atriums im Westen ermöglichen. Auf der nördlichen Seite der Kirche existierten weitere Räume unbekannter Funktion. Der Bau der Kirche erfolgte, wie die Straßenschichten vermuten lassen, in der ersten Hälfte des 5. Jahrhunderts n. Chr., während in der zweiten Hälfte des 5. oder im frühen 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr. eine aufwendige Renovierung stattfand. Die Keramikfunde lieferten kein aussagekräftiges Material. Sie unterstützen die Datierung der Kirche in die Blütephase der Stadt im 4. bis 6. Jahrhundert. Das Gebäude wurde wahrscheinlich am Ende der spätbyzantinischen Zeit verlassen.

Dass mit Basilika B ein zweiter flächenmäßig sehr großer und weitläufiger Kirchenraum in Elusa gefunden wurde, lässt die Frage aufkommen, ob dies eine Besonderheit an diesem Ort darstellt, ob die Gemeinden dieser beiden Kirchen besonders reich waren und ein ausgeprägtes Repräsentationsbedürfnis hatten oder ob Pilgerströme mit vielen Gläubigen große christliche Versammlungshäuser bedingten. Die wenigen Schriftquellen ergehen sich in völligem Schweigen hierzu.¹² Archäologische Untersuchungen an weiteren vermuteten christlichen Sakralgebäuden in Elusa sollen in Zukunft die Bedeutung des Christentums in Elusa klären, auch in wirtschaftlicher Hinsicht.

¹² Pau Figueras, "Monks and Monasteries in the Negev Desert," *LA* 45 (1995), 401–450, here 410–411; and Philip Mayerson, "The city of Elusa in the literary sources of the fourth to sixth centuries," *IEJ* 33 (1983), 247–253.



Azotos Paralios (Ashdod-Yam, Israel) during the Periods of Roman and Byzantine Domination: Literary Sources vs. Archaeological Evidence

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INTRODUCTION

THE FATE OF THE COASTAL SITE of Ashdod-Yam ("Ashdod by the Sea"; Asdudimmu in Neo-Assyrian sources; Azotos Paralios in Classical and Byzantine sources) has always been connected to the important city of Ashdod, which was one of the five major Philistine cities during the Iron Age (fig. 1). Ashdod was located about 5 km further inland from Ashdod-Yam.

During the Byzantine period, however, as is evident from the sixth-century CE Madaba mosaic map (fig. 2) as well as from historical sources, the coastal city of Azotos Paralios became more important than its former capital Azotos Hippenos, known also as Azotos Mesogaios.¹ It seems that evidence for this shift in the region's center of

¹ Yoram Tsafrir, Leah Di Segni, and Judith Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani. Iudaea-Palaestina. Eretz-Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods: Maps and Gazetteer* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 72.

gravity from Ashdod to Ashdod-Yam can be detected for a much earlier point in time, perhaps already during the Iron Age.²

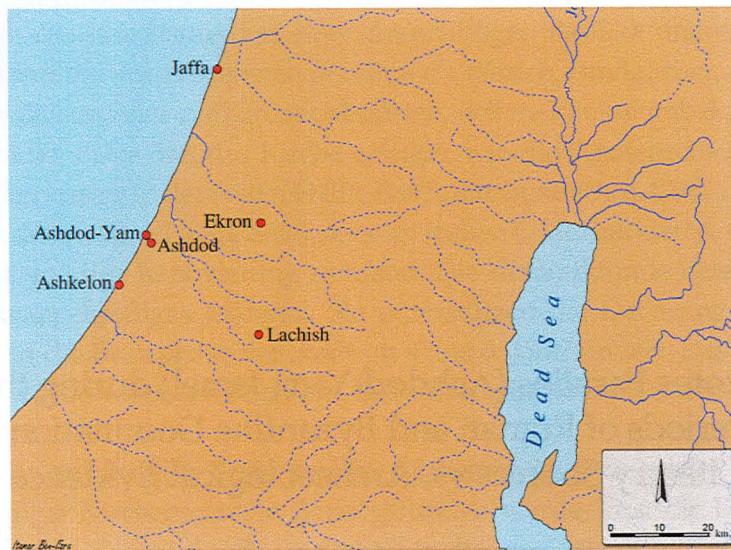


Fig. 1: The general location of the site of Ashdod-Yam.

The period of Late Antiquity constitutes the peak of ancient settlement activity at Ashdod-Yam. During this time, the site was truly impressive, covering an area that extended at least 2 km from north to south, and ca. 1.5 km from east to west, as is evident from the aerial photograph taken in 1944 (fig. 3).

Nowadays, the remaining archaeological site is surrounded by modern buildings and enjoys the status of a protected zone. In the southern part of the site there is a mound (acropolis) incorporated into an artificial enclosure, constructed and occupied during the period of the Iron Age IIB–IIC (eighth to seventh centuries BCE). The remains of the Roman-Byzantine city, covered by dunes, are spread to the north of the enclosure. An impressive excavated fortress, dating from the time of the Early Islamic period up to the Crusader period, is located

at the northern part of the site.³ The Iron Age enclosure of Ashdod-Yam was excavated in intervals between November 1965 and March 1968 by Jacob Kaplan, on behalf of the Museum of Antiquities of Tel Aviv-Jaffa.⁴ Starting in 2013, a new excavation project on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University has been launched, under the directorship of Alexander Fantalkin.

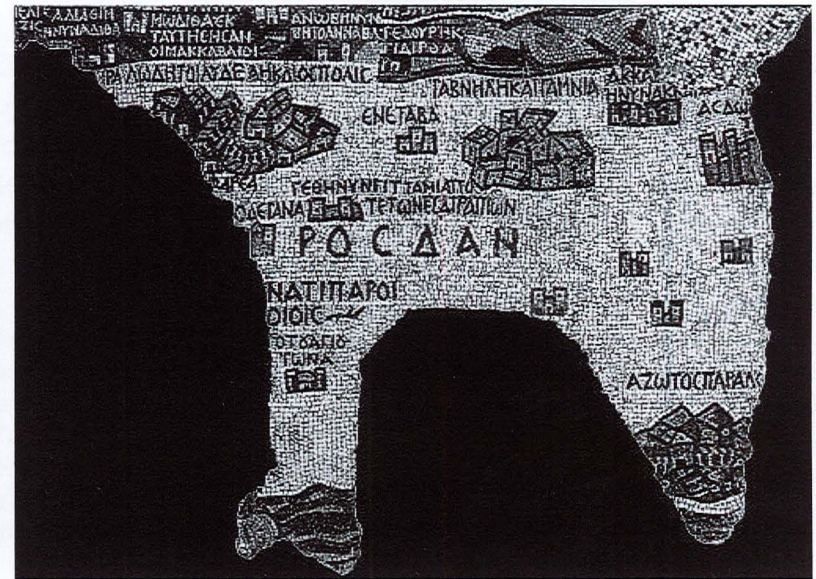


Fig. 2: Representation of Ashdod-Yam (Azotos Paralios) and Ashdod (Azotos Hippenos, known also as Azotos Mesogaios) on the relevant section of the Madaba mosaic map from the sixth century CE.

Five excavation seasons have been conducted thus far (in 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021), revealing impressive remains from the Iron Age IIB–C (eighth to sixth centuries BCE) and Hellenistic (second century BCE) periods.⁵ During the last two campaigns, the remains of

³ Sarah Kate Raphael, *Azdud (Ashdod-Yam): An Early Islamic Fortress on the Mediterranean Coast* (BAR 2673; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2014).

⁴ Jacob Kaplan, "The Stronghold of Yamani at Ashdod-Yam," *IEJ* 19 (1969), 137–149.

⁵ Fantalkin, "Ashdod-Yam"; Alexander Fantalkin, "Neo-Assyrian Involvement in the Southern Coastal Plain of Israel: Old Concepts and New Interpretations," in *The Southern Levant under Assyrian Domination*, eds. Shawn Zelig Aster and Avraham

² Alexander Fantalkin, "Ashdod-Yam on the Israeli Mediterranean Coast. A First Season of Excavations," *Skyllis: Zeitschrift für Unterwasserarchäologie* 14 (2014), 45–57.

an impressive Byzantine complex have been exposed, which allow us to gain new insights into the city's history during this period.



Fig. 3: Aerial photograph of the site of Ashdod-Yam, taken in 1944.

Faust (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 162–185; Alexander Fantalkin, Mati Johananoff, and Shahar Krispin, "Persian-Period Philistian Coins from Ashdod-Yam," *Israel Numismatic Journal* 11 (2016), 23–28; Angelika Berlejung and Alexander Fantalkin, "Ein magischer Moment: Zu einem neuen Amulettfund aus Aschdod-Yam," in *Zauber und Magie in Palästina und in seiner Umwelt*, eds. Markus Witte, Rolf Schäfer, and Jens Kamlah (ADPV—Monograph Series of the German Society for Exploration of Palestine 46; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 285–308; Angelika Berlejung and Alexander Fantalkin, "Ausgrabungen in Ashdod-Yam: Hafenzentrum und Klosterstadt," *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 4 (2017), 66–68; and Dana Ashkenazi and Alexander Fantalkin, "Archaeometallurgical and Archaeological Investigation of Hellenistic Metal Objects from Ashdod-Yam (Israel)," *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 11 (2017), 913–935.

LITERARY SOURCES

The literary sources about the Roman and Byzantine periods of the history of the city are not abundant.⁶ The place is usually mentioned perfunctorily in the context of historical events, but we learn surprisingly little about the city itself. The following discussion will concentrate mainly on the historical sources related to the Imperial and Late Antique periods of the history of Ashdod and Ashdod-Yam.

The assumption that the city was more Greek than for instance Caesarea seems to be confirmed by the fact that already the Hellenistic *Life of Jonah*,⁷ a text that is a part of the *Lives of the Prophets*, calls Azotos "city of the Greeks." This designation places the origins of the work during the time of the conflict between Jewish and pagan inhabitants of Judaea from the second century BCE until the first century CE.⁸

⁶ The available literary sources were recently put together in Leah Di Segni and Yoram Tsafrir, with Judith Green, *The Onomasticon of Iudaea, Palaestina and Arabia in the Greek and Latin Sources. Vol. II, Part 2: Arabia, chapter 5—Azeira. Research Bibliography, Indexes and Maps* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2017), 1233–1265; for a historical overview see also Benjamin Isaac, "XII. Azotus. Introduction," in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae. Vol. III: South Coast (2161–2648)*, eds. Walter Ameling and others (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 199–201.

⁷ Anna Maria Schwemer, *Studien zu den frühjüdischen Prophetenlegenden. Vitae Prophetarum. Band II: Die Viten der kleinen Propheten und der Propheten aus den Geschichtsbüchern. Übersetzung und Kommentar* (TSAJ 50; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 48–83; and Di Segni and Tsafrir, with Green, *Onomasticon, Vol. II, Part 2*, 1249–1250, n. 53, listing the various textual recensions of the work according to the Teubner edition of Theodor Schermann from 1907. The best new edition of the *Lives of the Prophets* is now the two-volume edition of Anna M. Schwemer with German translation and extensive commentary to each *vita*. On the manuscript tradition of the work and the variants of textual transmission see Anna Maria Schwemer, *Studien zu den frühjüdischen Prophetenlegenden. Vitae Prophetarum. Band I: Die Viten der großen Propheten Jesaja, Jeremia, Ezechiel und Daniel. Einleitung, Übersetzung und Kommentar* (TSAJ 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 12–22. On Schermann's edition see Schwemer, *Studien. Band I*, 22–23.

⁸ Schwemer, *Studien. Band I*, 48, ll. 2–3 and 57–60. The date of the *Lives of the Prophets* is still a matter of debate: David Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (SVTP 11; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 121–128, argues for their origin in the fourth to fifth centuries CE (followed by Leah Di Segni and Yoram Tsafrir, with Judith Green, *The Onomasticon of Iudaea, Palaestina and Arabia in the Greek and Latin Sources. Vol. I: Introduction, Sources, Major Texts* [Jerusalem: The

Beginning in 63 BCE, Pompey the Great set about to reorganize the eastern part of the Roman Empire; he dissolved what had remained of the Seleucid Empire and established the Roman province of Syria. From 57 BCE on, Aulus Gabinius was governor of the province and according to Flavius Josephus he ordered several cities to be rebuilt and resettled, among them Azotos.⁹ However, Benjamin Isaac has cast strong doubts upon the existence of this “building program of Gabinius in Palestine” that is sometimes mentioned as a fact in scholarly literature.¹⁰ Indeed, there are no securely dated buildings, let alone inscriptions so far, that point to a connection with Gabinius or even to the Republican epoch in general.

Herod the Great received the city from the Roman emperor Augustus as a gift, just like the place he later called Caesarea Maritima; it is therefore a safe assumption that he would have set out to erect a Roman city on a Hippodamic street grid, with cultic and administrative buildings and the habitual Roman amenities like a theater, a race-course, *thermae*, and perhaps a library. After Herod's death his sister Salome inherited the place. After her death it probably became (like Iamnia) the property of Augustus's wife Livia.¹¹ If this was the case,

Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2015], 137). However, the majority of scholars still puts the creation of the whole collection in the first half of the first century CE at the latest. For the main arguments see Schwemer, *Studien. Band I*, 68–69. Further evidence is presented in her detailed commentary to each *vita*. In Late Antiquity “Hellenes” was the Christian designation for pagans, which makes it impossible that the Christian city of Azotos should have been called πόλις Ἑλλήνων at this time.

⁹ Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* I.7.7 [156] and I.8.4 [166] (see Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1238, nn. 18–19); see Friedrich Karl Ginzel, *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie. Das Zeitrechnungswesen der Völker, III. Band* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1914), 47. The events are also mentioned in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIV 75–76 and 87–88 (see Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1242, notes 28–29).

¹⁰ Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of the Empire: the Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 336–340.

¹¹ Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* II.6.3 (98) (see Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1238, n. 20); Moshe Dothan, “Ashdod,” in *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land I*, ed. Michael Avi-Yonah (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 103–119, here 104; see also Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land*

Azotos Paralios may have become a *patrimonium Caesaris* after Livia's death, placed under the direct authority of the emperor Tiberius.¹²

In the course of the Jewish War, Vespasian left garrisons in Iamnia and Azotos.¹³ The fact that Azotos Paralios must have been a rich and flourishing city in imperial times is borne out by the geographer Pomponius Mela in his work *De chorographia*, written in the middle of the first century CE: Azotos was the only harbor for Arabia.¹⁴ This source has been virtually overlooked by scholars so far. Yet the use of the word *emporium* points to a rather important hub in the economic system of the ancient world, especially in the trade of luxury goods like fragrances and incense that were in increasing demand in Rome and are explicitly mentioned by Mela in the same context as the main export goods of Arabia. Although Carol Glucker suggested that this testimony should not be taken seriously,¹⁵ Mela was working with one or more detailed geographical sources and very possibly maps. While he did make his share of errors, his intended audience were the members of the educated Roman upper class. At his time, the Roman army had been involved in the Near East for about three hundred years; the

from the Persian to the Arab Conquests (536 BC. to A.D. 640). *A Historical Geography* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1966), 87 and 99–100.

¹² See Benjamin Isaac, “VII. Iamnia. Introduction,” in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae. Vol. III: South Coast (2161–2648)*, eds. Walter Ameling and others (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014). 151–157, here 152; and Isaac, “XII. Azotos. Introduction,” 199.

¹³ Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* IV.8 [129–130] (see Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1239, n. 21); Isaac, “XII. Azotos. Introduction,” 201, saw this measure as pointing at a large number of Jews living there at that time.

¹⁴ Pomponius Mela, *De chorographia* I.10.61 (see Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1237, n. 15): *Arabia [...] plane et sterilis, portum admittit Azotum suarum mercium emporium*. On the date of the work see Frank E. Romer, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 2–3.

¹⁵ In the opinion of Carol Glucker, *The City of Gaza in the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (BAR International Series 325; Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1987), 90, Mela was clearly confused in placing *Azotus* as a main port of trade for the whole of Arabia. Needless to say, it was mostly Gaza that served as the major terminus for the incense trade route, distributing the luxury goods into Mediterranean markets. This does not, however, negate the assumption that Ashdod may have played an important role in this network as well.

foundation of Hellenistic geographical research the Roman geographers were building upon were therefore supplemented by the Romans' own experience in the region.¹⁶ Already half a century earlier, the Greek geographer Strabo noted that the inhabitants of Azotos (whom he called a "tribe," like the Judeans, Idumenans, and Gazeans) were part farmers, like the inhabitants of Syria and Coele-Syria, part merchants, like the Phoenicians.¹⁷

During the second century CE the Roman emperor Hadrian stationed two legions in Palestine and promoted the urbanization of the area. This can be seen very clearly in Caesarea Maritima where the buildings Herod the Great had erected from the local sandstone were replaced by marble structures; moreover the city got a new aqueduct. Very probably Azotos Paralios profited from Hadrian's measures as well.

Azotos Paralios must have become the seat of the bishop of Azotos in the Byzantine period, when Azotos Hippenos (inland Ashdod, located at Tel Ashdod) was reduced in its importance. During this period, the bishops of Azotos would supervise not only the coastal town, but also the surrounding country, which included the inland city of Ashdod and additional areas with several daughter churches and monasteries.¹⁸

¹⁶ Romer, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, 21; Holger Sonnabend, *Die Grenzen der Welt: geographische Vorstellungen in der Antike* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 93, therefore thinks Mela and other Roman geographers thoroughly qualified. Indeed, in Mela's time there must have been so many soldiers and traders with travel experience in the area that the public would have spotted serious errors on the geographer's part.

¹⁷ Strabo 16.2.2 (see Di Segni and Tsafirir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1236–1237, n. 13): Ἀζωτίους [...] γεωργικούς μὲν, ὡς τοὺς Σύρους καὶ Κολλοσύρους, ἐμπορικούς δὲ, ὡς τοὺς Φοίνικας.

¹⁸ For the extension of the territory of Azotos and the border between the territories of Azotos and Ascalon see most recently Leah Di Segni, "The Inscriptions in the Church of Hazor-Ashdod, and Some Observations on the Boundaries of the Territory of Ascalon," in *Between Sea and Desert: On Kings, Nomads, Cities and Monks. Essays in Honor of Joseph Patrich*, eds. Orit Peleg-Barkat, Jacob Ashkenazi, Uzi Leibner, Mordechai Aviam, and Rina Talgam (Jerusalem: Kinneret Academic College and the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2019), 41–53.

Azotos Paralios must, indeed, have been a place of importance. It is worth remembering that of the five ancient Philistine cities (Ashdod, Ascalon, Ekron, Gat, and Gaza) Azotos is the only city mentioned specifically in the New Testament. According to Acts 8:40, the apostle Philip was spirited away to Azotos, where he preached the gospel.¹⁹ Martin Hengel argued that this tale was part of an older, pre-Lucan tradition (the motif as such recalling Old Testament prophets being carried away) that was deliberately included by Luke in his narrative to legitimize the mission in a predominantly pagan (non-Jewish) town at such an early date, when mission among non-Jews was still a debated issue among Christians.²⁰ However, contrary to Caesarea, the city is mentioned conspicuously rarely in Talmudic sources. As an intellectual center, it was most certainly overshadowed by Caesarea Maritima whose famous library of Origen and Eusebius as well as the renowned Rabbis of Caesarea made it a center of learning and intellectual debates.

The following bishops of Azotos are attested in known historical sources: Bishop Silvanus at the Council of Nicaea 325 CE²¹; Bishop

¹⁹ Gaza is mentioned as a geographical marker within the context of the same story (Acts 8:26). Philip was on his way from Jerusalem to Gaza, when he met and baptized an Ethiopian eunuch. Following this encounter, Philip was spirited away to Azotos, before he moved to the north.

²⁰ Di Segni and Tsafirir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1237, n. 16; and Martin Hengel, "Der Historiker Lukas und die Geographie Palästinas in der Apostelgeschichte," *ZDPV* 99 (1983), 146–183, here 165–167. This episode is also told at greater length in the legendary acts of the apostle Philipp (third century CE); see Di Segni and Tsafirir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1245–1246, nn. 34–36.

²¹ Heinrich Gelzer, Heinrich Hilgenfeld, and Otto Cuntz, eds., *Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina. Latine Graece Coptice Syriace Armeniace* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1898, reprinted 1995), LXI, cap. XI, nr. 35: Σιλουανός Ἀζώτου. See Di Segni and Tsafirir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1248–1249, n. 51.

Charisius at the Council of Seleucia 359 CE²²; and Bishop Heraclius at the Second Council of Ephesus (449 CE) and at Chalcedon (451 CE).²³

An inscription from 511 CE, found in the church at Khirbet Barqa, mentions previously unknown Bishop Iohannes, who should certainly be considered as one of the bishops of Azotos, since the village of Barca (or, Barqa) belonged to its diocese of Azotos.²⁴ Interestingly, Bishop Iohannes did *not* attend the Synod of Jerusalem in 518 CE, most likely because he opposed the Chalcedonian creed.²⁵ At the Synod of Jerusalem in 536 CE, there was present again a bishop of Azotos, Bishop Lazarus.²⁶ The assumption that Bishop Iohannes did not attend the synod in Jerusalem because of his anti-Chalcedonian views is probably confirmed by an inscription from Tel Ashdod (100 m east of the tel) that uses the era of Eleutheropolis, in contrast for example to the church of Ḥazor Ashdod, which is located only 5 km to the east of that church at Tel Ashdod. The Ḥazor Ashdod inscription bears a date by the era of Ascalon and the name of a catholic bishop of Ascalon. According to Leah Di Segni, the reason for the choice of a non-local era (Eleutheropolis is rather far away in the Negev) in the monastery of Tel Ashdod, is an indication of “a wish on the abbot's part to symbol-

²² Epiphanius, *Panarion haer.* 73.26 (ed. Karl Holl, second revised edition Jürgen Dummer, *Epiphanius Bd. 3: Panarion haer. 65–80: De fide* [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985], 301, line 9): Χαρίσιος ἐπίσκοπος Ἀζώτου. See Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1251, n. 56.

²³ Eduard Schwartz, ed., *Concilium Universale Chalcedonense, Volumen prima, Pars prima. Epistularum collectiones, Actio prima* (ACO 2.1.1; Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1933), 58, line 8. See Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1253–1254, nn. 62–63.

²⁴ Leah Di Segni, “The Greek Inscription from Tel Ashdod: A Revised Reading,” *Atiqot* 58 (2008), 32–36.

²⁵ Di Segni, “The Greek Inscription from Tel Ashdod,” 34; and Leah Di Segni, “Greek Inscription in the Church of Bishop John at Khirbet Barqa-Gan Yavneh,” in *Christ is Here! Studies in Biblical and Christian Archaeology in Memory of Michele Piccirillo*, ed. Lesław Daniel Chrupcała (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. Collectio maior 52; Milano: Edizioni Terra Santa [ETS], 2012), 147–150.

²⁶ Eduard Schwartz, ed., *Collectio Sabbaitica contra Acephalos et Origeniastas destinata: insunt acta Synodorum Constantinopolitanae et Hierosolymitanae A. 536* (ACO 3; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1940), 188, line 16.

ically mark the border between himself and his foundation, and the catholic bishop of Ascalon.”²⁷

The city has played a role already in the *Life of St. Porphyry*, who was bishop of Gaza from 395 to 420 CE. The author of the *Life*, Mark the Deacon, told of how the saint came down with a fever after corrupt magistrates of the town allowed the Marneion, one of the most prominent pagan shrines of the city, to remain in function in spite of the emperor's decree to close the pagan temples. However, after a week the *magister officiorum* arrived with two judicial officers of the governor's bureau and many assistants from Azotos and Ascalon²⁸ and had the three main magistrates of Gaza arrested. Obviously, Azotos was at that time already more thoroughly Christianized than Gaza, a stronghold of pagan culture. The city of Azotos also seems to have had at its disposal a more efficient force that allowed imposing law and order, the βουθός (*adiutor*) being a kind of “police minister” to whom three βουθοὶ τοῦ βουθοῦ (*subadiuvae*, lit. “helpers of the helper” were assigned.²⁹

Around 485 CE Peter the Iberian, one of the most important saints and a founder of monasteries in the Holy Land, entered the scene at this place. Initially having been named Nabarnugios, he was a prince from what is today Georgia in the Caucasus. Peter was born around 417. He grew up as a hostage at the court of Constantinople, where he became increasingly devout. At the age of twenty he embarked on pilgrimage with his companion and religious guide Mithradates (later

²⁷ Di Segni, “The Greek Inscription from Tel Ashdod”; Di Segni, “Greek Inscription in the Church of Bishop John at Khirbet Barqa-Gan Yavneh”; and Walter Ameling, “XII. Azotos. A. Res sacrae,” in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae. Vol. III: South Coast (2161–2648)*, eds. Walter Ameling and others (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 205–206, n. 2297.

²⁸ Marc the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry* ch. 27 (eds. and trans. Henri Grégoire and Marc-Antoine Kugener, *Marc le Diacre, Vie de Porphyre, Évêque de Gaza. Texte établi, traduit et commenté* [Turnhout: Brepols, 1930], 23, line 11 [Greek] and 24 [French]): βουθούς πολλούς ἕκ τε Ἀζώτου καὶ Ἀσκάλωνος; see Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1252, n. 61. The work was written around the middle of the fifth century CE. For the date see the introduction in Grégoire and Kugener, *Marc le Diacre*, xxxiii–xxxvii.

²⁹ See the commentary in Grégoire and Kugener, *Marc le Diacre*, 23.

named John the Eunuch). At their arrival in the Holy Land they were first received by Melania the Younger and stayed at her monastery on the Mount of Olives. Later Peter founded his own monastery near David's tower, a location subsequently known as the monastery of the Iberians.³⁰ Against his own wishes, Peter was ordained a priest, but he avoided serving as such until he became bishop of Maiuma, the harbor of Gaza, in 444 CE. Later on, Peter was involved in the anti-Chalcedonian revolt in Palestine.³¹ After six months, the revolt was crushed and Peter went into exile in Egypt, where he was an active anti-Chalcedonian leader fighting for the cause. After the death of the emperor Leo, Peter returned to Palestine in 475 CE, but not to his *laura* at Maiuma. Instead, he went to the village of Peleia near Ascalon, where the atmosphere was apparently more friendly towards those who disagreed with the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon.³² He became a public figure there, "a monophysite holy man performing miracles"³³; it seems he was a saint for Christians, Samaritans, and Jews alike who

³⁰ Aryeh Kofsky, "Peter the Iberian. Pilgrimage, Monasticism and Ecclesiastical Politics in Byzantine Palestine," *LA* 47 (1997), 209–222, here 210–213; and Yana Tche-khanovets, *The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land. Armenian, Georgian and Albanian Communities between the Fourth and Eleventh Centuries CE* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 166–169. See Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix Jr., eds., *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem, and the Monk Romanus. Edited and Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (WGRW 24; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) for a translation from the Syriac and an introduction with discussion of the authorship.

³¹ John Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* 75 [R 51] (eds. and trans. Horn and Phenix Jr., *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian*, 106–107; the references preceded by 'R' and placed in square brackets are to the page numbers in Richard Raabe, ed. and trans., *Petrus der Iberer: Ein Charakterbild zur Kirchen- und Sittengeschichte des 5. Jahrhunderts: Syrische Übersetzung einer um das Jahr 500 verfassten griechischen Biographie* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1895]); David Marshall Lang, "Peter the Iberian and his biographers," *JEH* 2 (1951), 158–168, here 165–167; and Kofsky, "Peter the Iberian," 214.

³² John Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* 105 [R 77] (eds. and trans. Horn and Phenix Jr., *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian*, 156–157); and Lorenzo Perrone, *La chiesa di Palestina e le controversie cristologiche: dal Concilio di Efeso (431) al secondo Concilio di Costantinopoli (553)* (Testi e Ricerche di Scienze Religiose 18; Brescia: Paideia editrice, 1980), 92, 121, and 166.

³³ Kofsky, "Peter the Iberian," 215.

came to him to be blessed and healed.³⁴ Peter died in Jamnia, not far from Ashdod-Yam, around 491 CE.

When he visited Azotos Paralios, he refused to take up residence in the middle of the town, in spite of the local inhabitants begging him to do so. Instead, Peter "lodged in a depot, set up at the seashore, a narrow and despicable place, and without any bodily comfort."³⁵ At this time, Peter played a pivotal role in the ascetic community in Palestine, who opposed the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon. Peter had expressly stated his wish to die while on pilgrimage.³⁶ Obviously, he aimed at giving a pointed lesson to the locals, educating them for the benefit of their salvation: Preaching from a "depot, set up at [...] [a] despicable place" at Ashdod-Yam, he achieved much more than he could possibly have accomplished if he would have resided inside the city. This was his strategy and his last struggle in an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of a theological stance against the Chalcedonian council and emphasizing Christ's divine nature, an act of education in a way, which despite its large following, did not succeed in the long run in Palestine.

Given the indications presented so far, it seems that the Late Antique city of Azotos Paralios must have been a place of considerable wealth and importance. However, the Classical and Byzantine sources related to the city are admittedly modest.

³⁴ John Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* 170 [R 126–127] (eds. and trans. Horn and Phenix Jr., *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian*, 246–249); and Aryeh Kofsky, "Observations on Christian-Jewish Coexistence in Late Antique Palestine (Fifth to Seventh Centuries)," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 23 (2006), 433–446, here 440–441.

³⁵ John Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* 162 [R 121] (eds. and trans. Horn and Phenix Jr., *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian*, 238–239; also trans. Cornelia B. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine. The Career of Peter the Iberian* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 234); see also Lorenzo Perrone, "Pierre l'Ibère ou l'exil comme pèlerinage et combat pour la foi," in *Man Near a Roman Arch: Studies presented to Prof. Yoram Tsafrir*, eds. Leah Di Segni, Yizhar Hirshfeld, Joseph Patrich, and Rina Talgam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 190*–204*, here 201*.

³⁶ The fundamental monograph on Peter the Iberian is Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine*.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The earliest archaeological remains from Ashdod-Yam are dated to the Late Bronze Age and were found at the southernmost part of the site.³⁷ The extensive remains from the Iron Age IIB–C and Hellenistic periods, discovered so far on the acropolis, were found about 1 km to the north, while the most extensive remains from the Roman-Byzantine period have shifted much further to the north. The Islamic fortress is also located in the northern part of the site. This spatial “horizontal” configuration of archaeological remains from different periods is very unusual and, most probably, reflects notable changes in the sea level and sand deposition on the coast and on the seabed. These changes have affected the location of the shoreline during the different periods. They had a direct impact on the location of port facilities in relation to the coastline.³⁸

The following discussion will concentrate on the known material remains from the Classical, mainly Byzantine, periods in the history of Ashdod-Yam. Thus, during the renewed excavations of the Iron Age

³⁷ Pirhiya Nahshoni, “A Thirteenth-Century BCE Site on the Southern Beach of Ashdod,” *Atiqot* 74 (2013), 59–122.

³⁸ See, for example, Ehud Galili, Mina Weinstein-Evron, and Avraham Ronen, “Holocene Sea-Level Changes Based on Submerged Archaeological Sites off the Northern Carmel Coast in Israel,” *Quaternary Research* 29 (1988), 36–42; Dorit Sivan, Shimon Wdowinski, Kurt Lambeck, Ehud Galili, and Avner Raban, “Holocene Sea-Level Changes along the Mediterranean Coast of Israel, Based on Archaeological Observations and Numerical Model,” *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 167 (2001), 101–117; Dorit Sivan, Kurt Lambeck, Ron Toueg, Avner Raban, Yosef Porat, and Boris Shirman, “Ancient Coastal Wells of Caesarea Maritima, Israel, an Indicator for Relative Sea-Level Changes during the Last 2000 Years,” *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* 222 (2004), 315–330; Eilat Toker, Dorit Sivan, Eliezer Stern, Boris Shirman, Michael Tsimplis, and Giorgio Spada, “Evidence for Centennial Scale Sea Level Variability during the Medieval Climate Optimum (Crusader Period) in Israel, Eastern Mediterranean,” *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* 315 (2011), 51–61; Eilat Toker, Jacob Sharvit, Moshe Fischer, Yosi Melzer, and Oded Potchter, “Archaeological, Geomorphological and Cartographical Evidence of the Sea Level Rise in the Southern Levantine Basin in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” *Quaternary International* 522 (2019), 55–65; and, specifically for Ashdod-Yam, Reuven Vunsh, Oren Tal, Yoseph Yechieli, Silas Dean, Elad Levanon, and Dorit Sivan, “Evaluating Ancient Coastal Wells at Sea Level Indicators from the Coast of Israel,” *Geoarchaeology* 33 (2018), 403–416.

acropolis of Ashdod-Yam, located in the southern part of the city (fig. 4), impressive Hellenistic remains have been unearthed. They consist of a monumental stone-built citadel, violently destroyed in the second half of the second century BCE. Numerous artefacts, including pottery, coins, weaponry, and weights, were unearthed in association with this building. The adjacent numerous structures from the same period, made of mud-bricks which stood on the stone foundations made of local beach-rock, had been abandoned and then destroyed by an earthquake in the late second to early first centuries BCE.³⁹



Fig. 4: Aerial photograph of the acropolis, located at the southern part of the site (looking south).

The remains of the Late Roman and Byzantine city are covered by dunes and spread to the north of the acropolis. Except for a few excavated tombs,⁴⁰ until recently, archaeological excavations have revealed

³⁹ Fantalkin, “Ashdod-Yam”; and Ashkenazi and Fantalkin, “Archaeometallurgical and Archaeological Investigation.”

⁴⁰ Shlomo Pipano, “The History of Ashdod-Yam in the Byzantine Period,” in *Ashdod Geography, History, Nature and Short Hikes Article Collection*, ed. Bo’az Ra’anan (Ashdod: The Society for the Protection of Nature, 1990), 143–146 (in Hebrew); and

little about the city during these periods. However, many ancient structures (most likely from the same period) can be observed clearly on the aerial photographs that were taken during the period of the British Mandate in Palestine (fig. 3). This is not surprising if one takes into account the fragmentary depiction of the city, identified as ΑΖΟΤΟΣ ΠΑΡΑΛΟ[Σ], on the Madaba map, a floor mosaic dating from the mid-sixth century CE, from the church of St. George in Madaba, Jordan. The image gives the impression of a rich and important city (fig. 2). Thus, a colonnaded street with a red tiled roof is visible in the foreground. An entrance in the front opens towards what seems to be a monumental flight of stairs leading to the church immediately behind the street.⁴¹ The building is marked by the dark red cross on the side of the pitched roof; the pediment in front is yellow, including in its middle part what seems to be a sculpture or decoration. Perhaps this was intended to indicate the re-use of elements of a pagan temple. On the right side of the church two further buildings, featuring what appear to be windows, are visible. Whether these, too, are churches,⁴² cannot be decided easily. The semicircles in blue and white in front of the depiction have been interpreted as a pool or nymphaeum in the center of the city.⁴³ The porticoed street, which would have been lined by shops on either side, is a typical feature of a wealthy Late Antique town in the Roman East.⁴⁴

An impressive citadel (40 x 60 m), which has been identified as the *ribat* mentioned by al-Muqaddasi (tenth century CE), dating from the Early Islamic to the Crusaders' period, is located at the northern part of the site. It was erected on top of the Byzantine-period remains and was excavated by the Israel Antiquities Authority.⁴⁵ During the excavation of the fortress (inside and outside), traces of four large rectangular complexes, interpreted as remnants of the Byzantine-period *insulae*, were discovered directly beneath the Islamic structure. Most of the Byzantine pottery associated with these complexes was found mixed with the Early Islamic pottery. Some Byzantine building materials, such as marble columns and flagstones, were used in the construction of the fortress. Following strong winter storms, which occurred during the last decade, quite a number of Byzantine period harbor storage facilities were exposed in the areas to the north and to the south of the Islamic fortress. In addition, some 150 meters to the north of the fortress, the remains of two hitherto undocumented Byzantine churches have been reported by local inhabitants. A photo of a partially destroyed mosaic inscription from one of them allows one to date the site to around the middle of the fifth century CE. The capitals of the Constantinopolitan-type columns from the second church,⁴⁶ that have been discovered, suggest a dating of this material to around the second half of the fifth to the early sixth centuries CE (fig. 5).

Sa'ar Ganor, "Horbat Ashdod Yam," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 129 (2017), http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25173 [last accessed March 1, 2022].

⁴¹ Noël Duval, "Essai sur la signification des vignettes topographiques," in *The Madaba Map Centenary 1897–1997: Travelling through the Byzantine Umayyad Period. Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Amman, 7–9 April 1997*, eds. Michele Piccirillo and Eugenio Alliata (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1999), 134–146, here 140, no. 97.

⁴² As Herbert Donner, *The Mosaic Map of Madaba* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 64, thought they were.

⁴³ Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba Mosaic Map* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1954), 70.

⁴⁴ The fact that in imperial and Late Antique times the seaport Ashdod-Yam had become by far the city that was bigger and more important than the old capital is also borne out by the fact that on the Madaba map, the old inland place still retained the Semitic form of its name, as it points to the prominent Philistine city known from the Old Testament, whereas the predominant city of the Byzantine peri-

od is labelled in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the time. For this observation, we are grateful to Heinz-Günther Nesselrath (Göttingen). On the two cities see further Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land from the Persian to the Arab Conquests*, 149–150. Sometimes it is not quite clear, to which city ancient authors intend to refer when they mentioned "Azotos" without further specification, e.g. Eusebius, *Onomasticon* (ed. Erich Klostermann, *Eusebius, Werke 3.1: Das Onomastikon der biblischen Ortsnamen* [GCS 11.1; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904], p. 20, ll. 18–20; see also Di Segni and Tsafir, with Green, *Onomasticon. Vol. II, Part 2*, 1246, n. 37).

⁴⁵ Dov Nachlieli, "Ashdod Yam," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land 5, Suppl. Vol.*, eds. Efraim Stern and others (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2008), 1575–1576; and Raphael, *Azduđ*.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Thomas Zoltt, *Kapitellplastik Konstantinopels vom 4. bis 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Bonn: Habelt, 1994), 67, 178, and plate 41.

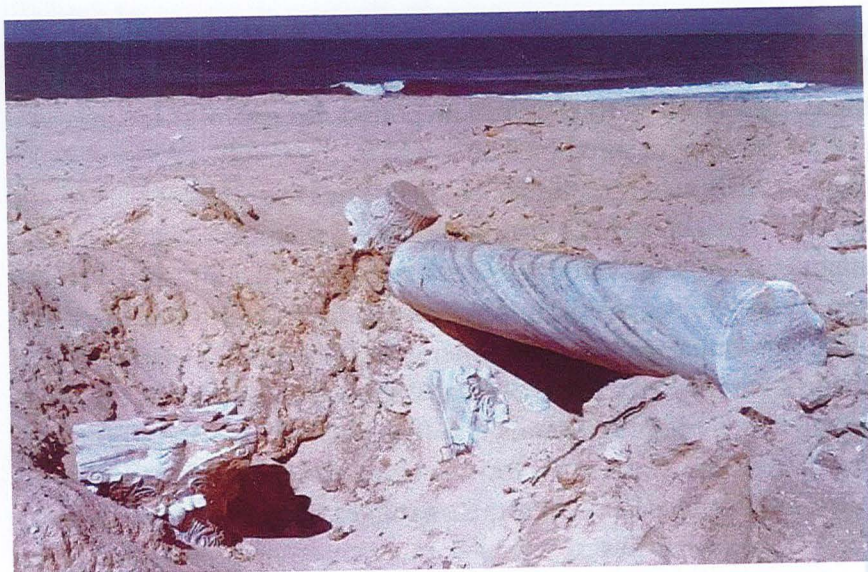


Fig. 5: The capitals of the Constantinopolitan-type columns from one of the unexcavated coastal churches.

In August 2017, during the third excavation season at the acropolis of Ashdod-Yam, the decision was made to conduct a limited sounding at the northern part of the site. The area that was examined is located some 500 m to the east and inland from the Islamic fortress, between the villas of modern Ashdod, at the place where some 30 years ago, during the modern construction activity, the traces of a mosaic floor were detected. This excavation immediately yielded spectacular results, pointing to the presence at the site of a Byzantine religious complex, including an almost fully preserved dedicatory Greek inscription.⁴⁷ The full excavation campaign of July/August 2019 focused

⁴⁷ The excavation (permit G-78/2017), directed by Alexander Fantalkin on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University (TAU) in cooperation with Sa'ar Ganor from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), was conducted with a small group of volunteers and took five working days. Shaik Lender (IAA) served as supervisor of the area. The restoration works at the end of the dig were conducted by the IAA team (Southern District).

on further exposing the remains of a church and associated structures.⁴⁸

Thus far, the remains of a large three-aisled basilica-style church with decorated mosaic floors were found, together with elaborated chapels at its northern side. An unusual number of dated inscriptions, seven thus far, and several Christograms incorporated into the mosaic floors, suggest that the complex was used between the early fifth to late sixth centuries CE.

The inscriptions have been translated and interpreted by Leah Di Segni (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and will be presented in their entirety elsewhere. At the moment, it is important to mention a series of memorial inscriptions for deaconesses and deacons. These were found together in the northern aisle of the main church, where the inscription of one of the deaconesses is placed in the most prominent location, very close to the main apse and a bema, with further inscriptions of the male deacons and another female deacon in a row (an inscription for a female and a male deacon alternate with one another). In addition, two bishops of Ashdod, mentioned in the inscriptions found in the chapels, are not attested so far in any other known historical source. The inscriptions, in which the year and indiction are mentioned, are all dated by a chronological system, which uses as a reference point the millennium of the city of Rome, celebrated by the Roman emperor Philippus Arabs in 247/248 CE.⁴⁹ This chronological system is very unusual for the region.

⁴⁸ The excavation (permit G-50/2019), directed by Alexander Fantalkin on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology at TAU, was conducted with a group of ca. 15 students and volunteers. The work took four weeks. Liora Bouzaglou (TAU) served as supervisor of the area, assisted by Yuval Hai (TAU). The restoration works at the end of the dig were conducted by the IAA team.

⁴⁹ Venance Grumel, *Traité d'Études Byzantines. I. La Chronologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), 146–153; Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computation and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 268–272. The legend, mentioned by the Christian historiographer Paulus Orosius, *Histories against the Pagans* 7.28.1 (trans. Andrew T. Fear, *Orosius. Seven Books of History against the Pagans, translated with an introduction and notes* [TTH 54; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010], 368), that Philippus Arabs had been the first Christian emperor might have favoured the acceptance of this era.

The parts of the complex that have been uncovered have yielded clear signs of destruction,⁵⁰ sealed by the burned layer of collapse of the wooden beams and roof tiles. It remains to be explained when and how exactly this destruction took place, given that the traces of a possible major earthquake seem to be identifiable as well. Unfortunately, the modern construction activity has ruined completely the narthex and the major parts of the central nave and southern aisle. However, the northern aisle was preserved in its entirety and was partially excavated. The eastern and the most important part of the nave with a central main apse have been excavated very recently.⁵¹ The history of the site is obviously complex due to several building phases that could be dated with the help of the dated inscriptions and architectural changes (fig. 6):



Fig. 6: Church complex (looking West), with its three suggested constructional phases: Stage 1 (blue); Stage 2 (red); Stage 3 (green).

⁵⁰ The destruction debris yielded numerous finds, such as the roof tiles, the pottery and glass items, and a variety of stone and metal objects.

⁵¹ The Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey conducted in the area of the excavated complex could demonstrate that the main apse is fully preserved.

Phase 1 (the main church): Based on the date of the earliest inscription (441/442 CE), located at the easternmost side of the northern aisle, the church was constructed in the early fifth century CE. This prominent inscription, dedicated to one of the deaconesses, is also the first and the longest in a whole row of dedicatory inscriptions located in the northern aisle.

Phase 2: Based on the dates of the inscriptions, the elaborate chapel has been attached to the eastern part of the northern aisle from the north around the middle of the fifth century CE. It is covered by a mosaic that is framed with ivy leaves in red and black, and a complex geometrical pattern. The central picture consists of an “inhabited scroll” with wine leaves emanating from a cantharos at the bottom, flanked by antithetical peacocks and nine medallions. These medallions depict, at the center, a bird in a cage, flanked by a lion and a deer. Above the cage, one finds a fruit bowl, flanked by birds. At the top, one can see a predatory cat attacking what is probably a calf (fig. 7).⁵² In the outer margin of the mosaic floor a clay jug was inserted into the floor, filled with an oily mixture of sand. The jug was carefully closed with a tile. At a certain stage, a small apse was added to the eastern side of the chapel. The floor of the apse is decorated with mosaics featuring a rose of Jericho in red and black, a medallion with a cross, and the monogram Alpha and Omega.

Phase 3: Based on the dates of the inscriptions, one may assume that during the course of the sixth century CE a series of rooms were added to the west of the chapel from Stage 2, abutting the northern aisle of the church as well. The floors of these rooms, the functions of which remain to be clarified, were covered with the spiralled carpet mosaics.

⁵² The mosaics have been studied and are being prepared for publication by Lihi Habas (Hebrew University of Jerusalem).



Fig. 7: A part of the mosaic in the chapel from Stage 2.

CHRONOLOGY

It remains a mystery, at least for now, why a church in Ashdod should opt for the use of this remote and unusual era that refers to the millennium of the city of Rome and should choose not to adopt the era of neighbouring Ascalon, from where the calendar is taken,⁵³ or the Alexandrian/Seleucid era that was widespread in this part of the world. The era chosen here was later taken over by the Armenians and Georgians for calculating the date of Creation. The era in question takes as its starting point the millennium of Rome, followed and preceded by a sequence of periods of 532 years each. It is generally assumed that the Armenians adopted this system in the middle of the sixth century CE, while the Georgians, in the Caucasus, are supposed to have introduced this system, in a way that differs somewhat from that of the Armenians, only in the eighth century CE. However, an inscription that was found in the vicinity of Jerusalem demonstrates that Georgians

⁵³ Initially, Ascalon used the Alexandrian/Seleucid era, but started a new one beginning in the year 104 BCE, when the city gained its freedom at the hands of the Maccabees; see Ginzel, *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie*, III. Band, 48. The names of the months (used also in Ashdod-Yam) remained those of the Macedonian calendar.

have used this system already from the sixth century CE on as well,⁵⁴ creating an era of Creation of their own, slightly different not only from the Armenian but also from the Alexandrian and Byzantine eras of Creation known in this region. That is to say, the Georgian era of Creation had been introduced in Palestine long before it came into use in Georgia itself. Could the use of this chronological system in Azotos Paralios represent a conscious rejection of the religious authority of Constantinople? There are reasons to believe that the city remained a stronghold of resistance against Chalcedon and its decisions for rather a long time.⁵⁵

One might also remember at this point that there are strong arguments for the Holy Land as a place of origin and creation of the Georgian alphabet. The oldest Georgian inscriptions, dating from the first half of the fifth century CE, are from a Georgian monastery near Bethlehem and from below the floor of a Franciscan church in Nazareth. The Georgians' desire for developing their own script was certainly motivated by liturgical needs and the wish for a translation of the Bible into Georgian, their native tongue.⁵⁶ In the fifth century CE conditions in Iberia itself, which at the time was heavily under Iranian influence, would not have been favourable to an endeavour of this kind. Yet the situation would have been quite different in a monastery in a part of

⁵⁴ Leah Di Segni, "The Beit Safafa Inscription Reconsidered and the Question of a Local Era in Jerusalem," *IEJ* 43 (1993), 157–168; confirmed also by Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus*, 272.

⁵⁵ Tchekhanovets, *The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land*, 198, published an undecipherable Georgian inscription from the area of Ascalon from the eighth-ninth century CE that is for now "the only material find associated with the Georgian community that has been discovered so far in the southern coastal region."

⁵⁶ Tchekhanovets, *The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land*, 137–149 and 193–195; Balbina Bäbler, "Hierotopia, Heterodoxia, and Gynaecotopia in the Holy Land," in this volume; Werner Seibt, "Wo, wann und zu welchem Zweck wurde das georgische Alphabet geschaffen?," in *Die Entstehung der kaukasischen Alphabete als kulturhistorisches Phänomen. Referate des Internationalen Symposiums, Wien, 1.–4. Dezember 2005*, eds. Werner Seibt and Johannes Preiser-Kapeller (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011), 83–90, here 88; and Tamara Grdzeldze, "Georgia, Patriarchal Orthodox Church of," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Anthony McGuckin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 264–291, here 269.

the world under Byzantine control.⁵⁷ If indeed the Georgian script was developed in the Holy Land and then brought to Georgia from there, a similar path might well have been followed by the travels of the system of chronology.

THE MEMORIAL INSCRIPTIONS FOR THE DEACONESSSES

To the best of our knowledge, there is nothing comparable to a series of memorial inscriptions for deaconesses and deacons found together in the northern aisle of the main church.⁵⁸

The early church sources on the diaconate demonstrate that the female order of deaconesses is clearly seen as an adjunct to, but distinct from and subordinate to, the male diaconate. The fullest and earliest account of the duties and tasks of female deacons is preserved in chapter 16 of the so-called *Didascalia Apostolorum*, written around 230 CE possibly near Antioch.⁵⁹ This Church Order is the most elaborate and detailed of its kind. It must have been written in the context of a relatively large community of around 1000 members⁶⁰ and distinguish-

⁵⁷ Seibt, "Wo, wann und zu welchem Zweck wurde das georgische Alphabet geschaffen?," 89–90, suggests that the fact that the Armenians celebrated in the monastery of St. Sabas the entire liturgy in their own language might have acted as an incentive. See also Perrone, "Pierre l'Ébère ou l'exil comme pèlerinage et combat pour la foi," 194.

⁵⁸ Ute E. Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum. Epigraphische und literarische Studien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) has only single inscriptions, mostly on grave stones. For a further updated collection see Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Hans Achelis and Johannes Flemming, *Die Syrische Didaskalia, übersetzt und erklärt* (Die ältesten Quellen des orientalischen Kirchenrechts, zweites Buch; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1904), 243–244 and 267; Aimé Georges Martimort, *Les Diaconesses. Essai historique* (Roma: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1982), 31–41; Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen*, 31–33; and Hedwig Röckelein, "Le genre et la compétition pour le sacré," in *Genre et compétition dans les sociétés occidentales du Haut Moyen Âge IV – XI siècle*, eds. Sylvie Joye and Régine Le Jan (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 167–177, here 169–171. The Greek original of the text is lost; the Syriac translation is preserved as well as a fragmentary Latin one that covers about two fifth of the text.

⁶⁰ Achelis and Flemming, *Die Syrische Didaskalia*, 267, estimated that this was the maximum since according to the *Didascalia* the members of the community still fitted into one church and two deacons were considered sufficient.

shes five grades of church officials: the bishop, presbyter, deacon and female deacon, lector, and widow. Priests, (female) deacons, lectors, and "official" widows were all chosen by the bishop. Since this is the first text that has been preserved that mentions female deacons, it seems that the office of a female diaconate was a new institution. It was created around that time, probably to replace the official order of the widows who were stripped of many of their functions, having been left with, primarily, the task of prayer. Perhaps this reduction in function was caused, because some of the widows had become too powerful and rich.⁶¹ The duties of a female deacon consisted mainly of visiting Christian women, especially when they lived in a pagan household, and nursing sick women.⁶² Female deacons were almost entirely a phenomenon of the Greek East, perhaps because the social pressures in the life of the church in the Orient were greater. There was certainly the fear of slander by the pagans that played a role in whether or not to allow female deacons to function; by sending only women to look after the women of the Christian community every semblance of indecency might be avoided.⁶³

An especially important task of the deaconess was the assistance at the baptism of women; while the sacramental act of baptism as such was reserved to be performed by the bishop, the rite included an

⁶¹ Achelis and Flemming, *Die Syrische Didaskalia*, 268 and 274–280; all the widows were provided for by the bishops, but only a few of them, those who were older than fifty, were selected into the official order of the widows. Some of them seem to have acted rather independently, even teaching or forgiving sins. See Susanna Elm, 'Virgins of God.' *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 169–172 and 181.

⁶² *Didascalia* 16 (III.12) (trans. Richard Hugh Conolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum. The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929], 146): "[...] for a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness."

⁶³ *Didascalia* 5 (II.8) (trans. Conolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 38–39); Achelis and Flemming, *Die Syrische Didaskalia*, 309–310; and Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 39–40. On this aspect see especially Michele Renee Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy. Social and Religious Change in the Western Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 170.

anointing of the whole body before the immersion in water for which a female deacon was needed. If no deaconess was present at the rite, only the head of the woman who was to be baptized was anointed.⁶⁴ In connection with serving at the rite of baptism, the deaconess had some teaching functions regarding the newly baptized.⁶⁵

If the duties of a female deacon were strictly limited to ministering to women, the position of the deaconess was nevertheless one of honor, as the author of the *Didascalía Apostolorum* points out:

[T]he bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the deacon stands in the place of Christ; and do you love him. And the deaconess shall be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Spirit; and the presbyters shall be to you in the likeness of the Apostles; [...].⁶⁶

Interestingly, the office is explicitly traced back to the women around Jesus:

For this cause we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important. For our Lord and Saviour also was ministered unto by women ministers, *Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee* [Matt 27:56], with other women beside.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Didascalía* 16 (III.12) (trans. Conolly, *Didascalía Apostolorum*, 146): "In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized." Cf. also Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 39–40. An interesting and mostly overlooked fact emerging from this passage is that the baptism required nakedness of the whole body. There was apparently more liberality in the Latin West, where widows and nuns were allowed not only to baptize, but also to teach the holy rite to lay women. See Röckelein, "Le genre et la compétition pour le sacré," 170.

⁶⁵ *Didascalía* 16 (III.12) (trans. Conolly, *Didascalía Apostolorum*, 147): "And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness."

⁶⁶ *Didascalía* 9 (II.26) (trans. Conolly, *Didascalía Apostolorum*, 88).

⁶⁷ *Didascalía* 16 (III.12) (trans. Conolly, *Didascalía Apostolorum*, 147–148).

While this is, of course, an anachronism, the activities of these women are explicitly designated with the verb διακονεῖν.⁶⁸ While there was not yet an office of any kind during New Testament times, these women seem to have performed specific ministries and duties that were different from those of men.⁶⁹

In the fourth century CE, the so-called *Apostolic Constitutions* (*Constitutiones Apostolorum*) were compiled that draw, to a considerable extent, on the third-century *Didascalía*. Its author however was not merely copying the most important passages of the *Didascalía*, but "felt the need to emphasize factors and introduce aspects which further limited the role of both deaconess and widow"⁷⁰:

Let also the deaconess be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Ghost, and not do or say anything without the deacon; as neither does the Comforter say or do anything of Himself, but gives glory to Christ by waiting for His pleasure.⁷¹

The female deacon is now reduced to a role of functioning as an intermediary between the women of the community and the male clergy: "And as we cannot believe in Christ without the teaching of the Spirit, so let not any woman address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess."⁷²

Later texts become more precise concerning the age and the social status of female deacons: The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) stated

⁶⁸ Luke 8:2–3 (δυναμῶν); Matthew 27:55–56 on the women at the cross (διακονοῦσαι).

⁶⁹ Margaret Mowczko, "What did Phoebe's Position and Ministry as Διάκονος of the Church at Cenchrea involve?," in *Deacons and Diakonia*, ed. Bart Koet (WUNT, 2. Reihe 419; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 91–101, here 98–99; see also her discussion of the functions of the "deacon Phoebe," whom the apostle Paul addressed in his letter to the Romans 16:1–2.

⁷⁰ Elm, 'Virgins of God.' *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, 174.

⁷¹ *Constitutio Apostolorum* II.26 (eds. and trans. Philipp Schaff and James Donaldson, "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol. VII: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily and Liturgies*, eds. Philipp Schaff and others [ANF 7; Edinburgh: Clark, 1885; reprinted Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978], 387–508 [with elucidations], here 410).

⁷² *Constitutio Apostolorum* II.26 (eds. and trans. Schaff and Donaldson, "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," 410).

that a deaconess was not allowed to be ordained (χειροτονεῖσθαι) before the age of forty and after a severe probation; she was forbidden to get married after her ordination (χειροθεσία).⁷³ About a century later, Justinian determined that deaconesses had to be virgins or widows of a single husband and at least fifty years old at the time of their “holy ordination” (ἱερὰ χειροτονία); the state of being a deaconess was irrevocable.⁷⁴ Both texts use the word or verb that refers to the laying on of hands by the bishop that imparts the grace of the Holy Spirit by which the function is sacralized.⁷⁵ Whether this ceremony meant that the female deacons became a full part of the clergy has been a hotly debated issue until today, for obvious reasons. The main argument against the χειροθεσία/χειροτονία of women having been a “real ordination,” like that of men, is the idea of a unity of the three-levelled *ordo* (deacon—priest—bishop) of the clergy; since women cannot become priests, the argument goes, the diaconate of women could not possibly have been a real *sacramentum* and thus women deacons could not possibly have been a full part of the clergy.⁷⁶ One has to admit that even the texts of the *Codex Iustinianus* concerning the status of female deacons are not always as clear and precise as one would wish and sometimes even contradictory, as Aimé Georges Martimort has shown: Female deacons are often mentioned explicitly after the male

⁷³ *Conc. Chal. Can. 15* (ed. Eduard Schwartz, *Concilium Universale Chalcedonense, Volumen primum, Pars altera, Actio secunda. Epistularum collectio B, Actiones III–VII* [ACO 2.1.2; Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1933], 161); Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 106; and Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen*, 158.

⁷⁴ Justinian, *Novella III.1–2* (of March 16, 535; in *Novellae* [eds. Rudolf Schöll and Wilhelm Kroll; vol. 3; second edition; Berlin: Weidmann, 1899], 21–22); and Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 107–108.

⁷⁵ Achelis and Flemming, *Die Syrische Didaskalia*, 268; Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 108–109; Elm, ‘*Virgins of God.*’ *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, 170; and Röckelein, “Le genre et la compétition pour le sacré,” 171.

⁷⁶ On this topic see, for example, Dirk Ansorge, “Der Diakonat der Frau,” in *Liturgie und Frauenfrage*, eds. Teresa Berger and Albert Gerhards (St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 1990), 31–65, here 46; and Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen*, 158. One is left wondering if in this line of argument causes, historical facts, and (desired) results are not rather mixed up: For if female deacons were actually ordained and their office was a *sacramentum* until at least the sixth century CE, why refuse it—and in consequence, the access to the priesthood—today?

clergy, but sometimes also among them; sometimes their function seems to indicate that the female diaconate is to be regarded as an office, but sometimes rather as a “state of life.”⁷⁷

Moreover, we should bear in mind that normative texts like church orders or laws do not necessarily reflect daily life. They might, on the contrary, be a sign of tensions and conflicts and the perceived need of imposing a discipline on a group within society.⁷⁸ It was obviously not self-evident what kind of regulations needed to be included explicitly in the text of a Church Order. These texts, that claim to go back as far as the teaching of the apostles, were, moreover, composed or assembled from different sources and trace their origins back to different times.⁷⁹ The history of women in the early church was, to a considerable extent, an oral history and not committed in writing to the documents of official church history. The literary sources offer no coherent, unified picture of the deaconess and her duties. The minimum age for the office, for example, oscillated between 40, 50, and 60 years. The limitations and contradictions of the literary texts highlight the importance of the inscriptions that have now come to the light of day in the church of Azotos Paralios.

EPILOGUE

The placement of the inscription of one of the deaconesses discovered at Azotos Paralios, which is positioned in the most prominent location at the top of the northern aisle of the church, and which is complemented by the inscriptions of the male deacons and another female deacon in a row, clearly suggests that that one deaconess played a very important role in this church. Could it be that these very unusual in-

⁷⁷ Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 109; see also Röckelein, “Le genre et la compétition pour le sacré,” 171.

⁷⁸ Chapter 15 of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* almost certainly aims at relegating the widows who had become too independent to a humbler and clearly defined place. See above and Elm, ‘*Virgins of God.*’ *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, 174–175, on the new rules in the *Constitutio Apostolorum* that “could indicate that the order of widows was not yet quite moribund, and that of the deaconess not yet altogether restricted.” See also Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen*, 216–217.

⁷⁹ Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 117, also points out that there were often great differences between local churches.

scriptions might partly explain or reveal something that is otherwise hidden in the silence of the official ecclesiastical sources, that do not say much, if anything about this important place? Perhaps, at a certain point in time the form of Christianity that was practised at Ashdod-Yam was considered as not conforming to the standards of orthodoxy as it was directed and determined through the church in Constantinople?⁸⁰ This silence is even more tantalizing, since it is only Azotos, out of several other major cities of Philistine Pentapolis, that featured prominently in the New Testament, in the story of Philip who, having baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, was led by the Holy Spirit to preach.

The data gained from the Ground Penetrating Radar surveys shows the presence of additional buildings in the vicinity of the main complex of the Byzantine church at Azotos Paralios. It remains to be seen if this complex represents a central cathedral of Azotos Paralios or if it is, rather, part of a large monastic compound.⁸¹

In the absence of other relevant archaeological and thus historical sources, only future excavations will shed more light on the question of the role of women in the early Church, the possible historical implications of the era, and perhaps more generally what it meant to be orthodox at the time and when one had stepped outside its boundaries. The case of Azotos Paralios prompts us to assess again the question of the relationship between literary sources vs. archaeological evidence for the history of Palestine. Even at this early stage of renewed excavations at the site, it is clear that the material evidence corrects and allows us to adjust in an astonishing measure and seemingly in a surprising direction the impression that the literary texts convey or intend to produce. The city of Azotos Paralios has so far been neglected in scholar-

⁸⁰ Cf. Di Segni, "The Greek Inscription from Tel Ashdod"; and Di Segni, "Greek Inscription in the Church of Bishop John at Khirbet Barqa-Gan Yavneh."

⁸¹ For literary evidence for women deacons at the head of monasteries see Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 133–136. The most famous case was that of Olympias of Constantinople, foundress of a monastery and correspondent of John Chrysostom; see Elm, 'Virgins of God.' *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, 178–180. See also the account of the pilgrim Egeria (ca. 381–384) who visited the monastery of the *sancta diaconissa nomine Marthana* in Cilicia. See Egeria, *Itinerarium* 23.3 (ed. and trans. Kai Brodersen, *Aetheria/Egeria. Reise ins Heilige Land. Lateinisch-deutsch* [Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016], 164).

ship dealing with Late Antiquity and church history, mainly due to the fact that it was so rarely mentioned in ancient literature. Yet, it is already obvious from the preliminary work that could be accomplished thus far that, **despite of the absence of rich literary sources about Azotos Paralios, any further archaeological investigation at this site will strengthen the impression of a prosperous coastal city during the Classical and Late Antiquity periods.** This will help to write more clearly, and in significantly greater detail, the history and genesis of the early Christian communities in those parts of the world, in which they saw the light of day and developed into their early, formative shape.