Why Did Nebuchadnezzar II Destroy Ashkelon in Kislev 604 B.C.E.?

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Introduction

The significance of the discovery of a destruction layer at Ashkelon, identified with the Babylonian assault in Kislev, 604 B.C.E, can hardly be overestimated. Beyond the obvious value of this find, which provides evidence for the policies of the Babylonian regime in the “Hatti-land,” it supplies a reliable chronological anchor for the typological sequencing and dating of groups of local and imported pottery (Stager 1996a; 1996b; Waldbaum and Magness 1997; Waldbaum 2002a; 2002b).

My main intention in this article is to explore the reasons behind the Babylonian destruction of Ashkelon. One may ask: why among “all the kings of Hatti” who willingly or unwillingly submitted to the Babylonian yoke already in the first regnal year of Nebuchadnezzar II did only Aga the king of Ashkelon apparently miscalculate, for which he was severely punished? But is it really the king of Ashkelon and his unwise policies that triggered the Babylonian destruction of the city, or should we seek an alternative explanation?

Author’s note: It is a great pleasure to contribute this paper to the Festschrift in honor of David Ussishkin, whose scholarship has shaped the current state of affairs in the field of Biblical Archaeology and will doubtlessly remain a source of inspiration for many generations of scholars to come.

1. In the editio princeps of the Babylonian chronicle (BM 21946, lines 18–20), Wiseman holds that although the first two signs of the toponym in question are doubtful, being written over an erasure, the most plausible restoration would be ḫ[iš-qi]-i-il-lu-nu (Wiseman 1956: 85), quite similar to the spelling of Ashkelon in Weidner’s tablets (iš-qil-lu-na-a, cf. Weidner 1939: 928). Later, however, influenced by Grayson’s skepticism (“uru-x-(x)-il-lu-nu: nothing can be read with certainty” Grayson 1975: 100; and see also 1980: 161), Wiseman arrived at the conclusion that this reading remains uncertain (Wiseman 1991: 23, n. 158). Following Stager’s request at the beginning of the Ashkelon excavations, the chronicle was collated once again by Finkel. According to Finkel: “the first syllable iš is quite clear; the second is probably qi; the third is almost certainly an erasure in which the scribe possibly wrote and then erased aleph; and the last three syllables -il-nu have never been in doubt” (Finkel apud Stager 1996a: 72*, n. 1). It seems that the identification of Ashkelon in the Chronicle has been assured. Recently, however, concerns have been raised as to the credibility of Finkel’s restoration. According to James, for instance, “there is no guarantee that this is the correct reading, and thus no clear evidence that the Babylonians campaigned in Philistia in 604 B.C.E. To hang the entire chronology of late Iron Age Philistia on a debated restoration seems perilous, to say the least” (James 2006: 91; and see James 2005: 14; cf. also Hutchinson 2001: 187; Reimer 2004: 209). Due to the great importance of the matter, Ran Zadok kindly agreed to collate the chronicle once again at my request. According to Zadok (personal communication), one should accept Finkel’s reading and the identification with Ashkelon, although in Zadok’s opinion, the second syllable should be read as qi, rather than qi.
According to the commonly held view, the case is straightforward: Ashkelon’s king sought actively to resist Nebuchadnezzar’s advance in 604 B.C.E., revolting, although in stark isolation, against a newly emerged supraregional power (see, e.g., Kitchen 1973: 67; Weippert 1987: 101; Betlyon 2003: 265). According to the excavator, “it was probably the pro-Egyptian policies of the Philistines of Ashkelon (and Ekron),\(^2\) which led to their demise in the winter of 604 B.C.E” (Stager 2008: 1584). Lipschits suggested that “none of the local kings dared stand up to Nebuchadnezzar, except for the king of Ashkelon. The proximity of Ashkelon to the Egyptian border and the long years of Egyptian rule were apparently the factors that led the king of this small kingdom to continue to rely on Egyptian assistance. Not understanding the change that had taken place in the international balance of power, he refused to capitulate to Babylon. The Babylonian response was decisive, and the fate of that city served as an example to the other kingdoms of the region” (Lipschits 2005: 40; see also Lipschits 2006: 22).\(^3\) Albertz (2003: 53) suggested that Nebuchadnezzar’s ascendency in the region was reinforced by the occasional conquests of cities “that were threatening to become Egyptian outposts, such as Ashkelon in 604.” In what follows, I will argue that the main reason for Ashkelon’s destruction in 604 B.C.E. derives from the probability that a major Egyptian outpost with a garrison was already installed at Ashkelon on the eve of the Babylonian destruction.

In fact, there is more at stake here than finding a possible reason for the Babylonian destruction of Ashkelon. Questions related to this destruction bear on broader problems: the presumed status of Ashkelon as an important Mediterranean port and the hub of the local economic system in the 7th century B.C.E.; questions related to Greek trade with the southern Levant during the period of Egyptian domination in the late 7th century B.C.E.; the interpretation of the East Greek ceramic assemblages from the same period, discovered at a number of sites along the Palestinian coast; and the enrollment of Greek mercenaries in the Near Eastern armies of the time.

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\(^2\) The archaeologically attested destruction of Ekron, although not mentioned in the surviving parts of the Babylonian Chronicle, was attributed to one of the Babylonian punitive campaigns which took place some time between 604 and 598/597 B.C.E. (for 604 B.C.E. date, see Na’aman 1992; Gitin 1998: 276, n. 2; Fantalkin 2001: 132; for 602/601 B.C.E. date, see Lipiński 2006: 160; for a date post-601/600 B.C.E., see Na’aman 1992; for 598/597 B.C.E. date, see Lipschits 2005: 52, n. 55).

\(^3\) Another line of reasoning was offered long ago by Tadmor: with the sudden fall of Nineveh, “Philistia seemed to have experienced a resurgence of nationalism with other nations previously subjugated to Assyria. It was this self-assertion which led Gaza to defy Egypt (Jeremiah 50:1), and Ashkelon to refuse to pay homage to Nebuchadrezzar, the victor of the battle of Carchemish” (Tadmor 1966: 102). This view is outdated, for it is obvious from the present state of research that, despite certain disorder after the Assyrian withdrawal from Ebir nāri in the twenties of the 7th century B.C.E., the region did not experience significant change due to immediate Egyptian intervention, and the time span between the end of Assyrian domination and the beginning of the Babylonian invasions shows a high degree of continuity under Egyptian hegemony (Na’aman 1991a: 33–41; Fantalkin 2001: 146–47). Likewise, the conquest of Gaza by Necho II, most probably in 601/600 B.C.E. (Katzenstein 1983), with its aim to regain control over local vassals, should not be compared to the destruction of Ashkelon by Nebuchadnezzar II in 604 B.C.E. Needless to say, in both cases the reasons for the destructions have nothing to do with a resurgence of the Philistine nationalism.
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Reassessing the Significance of the 7th Century B.C.E. Remains Discovered at Ashkelon

According to the excavators, Ashkelon was an exceptionally wealthy city in the 7th century B.C.E. (Stager 1996a; 1996b; 2008; Master 2001; 2003), and some scholars have suggested that the port of Ashkelon was at the heart of the local economic system (including Judah) during the days of the pax Assyriaca in the Levant (Faust and Weiss 2005; Tappy 2008: 395). In view of the modest size of the Kingdom of Ashkelon in the 7th century B.C.E. (Na’aman 2009), combined with the lack of developed rural hinterland around the city (Shavit 2008), its presumed prosperity and strength is explained by its favorable coastal location. In other words, Ashkelon’s dominant role in local and international commercial activity through the centuries derived from its “port power” (Stager 2001). Had this been the case, one could infer that the aim of the Babylonian destruction of Ashkelon was not just to punish a disobedient city but also to obtain rich booty.

Based on Quinn’s (1961) suggestion that the mention of Ashkelon and Babylon in a fragment of Alcaeus (Lobel-Page Fr. 48) should be linked to the well-known reference in another fragment of Alcaeus to his brother Antimenidas serving as a mercenary in the Babylonian army (Lobel-Page Fr. 350), many scholars concluded that Antimenidas participated personally in the destruction of Ashkelon (cf., e.g., Brown 2000: 189; Waldbaum 2002b: 138, n. 4; Finkelstein 2002: 146, n. 26; Raaflaub 2004: 208; Lipiński 2006: 159). Thus, according to Braun, “it was to join in the destruction of Ascalon that Antimenidas crossed the sea, and here that he won glory by killing and capturing the enemies of Babylon” (1982: 22). According to this scenario, Antimenidas and his peers are considered freelancers for hire who joined the operation against Ashkelon in hope of receiving rich booty, not unlike the famous Ottoman akinçi raiders of much later period, whose subsistence depended on plunder (cf. Shaw 1977: 129; Murphey 1999: 35). Leaving aside the credibility of this scenario for a moment (see addendum), we shall concentrate instead on the notion of Ashkelon as an extremely wealthy city prior to the Babylonian destruction.

The late 7th century B.C.E. archaeological remains unearthed at Ashkelon have been presented on many occasions (Stager 1996a; 1996b; 2008; Master 2001; 2003; Waldbaum 2002a; 2002b; Weiss and Kislev 2004; Stager et al. 2008) and should not be revisited here in detail. In brief, evidence of destruction was uncovered in two main locations: the winery and the storage building in Grid 38 (Phase 14) and the marketplace in Grid 50 (Phase 7; Stager et al. 2008: 279–83; 309–12). The architectural style of the winery and its location in the center of the city, suggests that this was a royal installation, under the supervision of King Aga (Stager 2008: 1585). The winery, with its deep foundation, largely effaced earlier remains in this area, which yielded just a few poorly preserved silos (Phase 15). The Phase 14 winery building had two sub-phases, both yielding very similar local ceramic assemblages. However, the abundant East Greek wares were present only in the later sub-phase.
(destroyed by the Babylonians) and were absent from both the floors of the earlier sub-phase and the fill layers between the two sub-phases. Among the wide variety of objects sealed by the Babylonian destruction, of particular importance are Egyptian cult items found in one of the rooms of the winery. A bronze statuette of the god Osiris and a faience statuette of Bes lay near a cache of seven bronze _situlae_, decorated with scenes of processions of deities, and in the midst of this cache a decorated bronze votive offering table was found. These finds led the excavators to conclude that a hoard of 25 bronze statuettes of Egyptian deities as well as 14 additional Egyptian bronze artifacts (including cube-shaped weights) found during Iliffe’s small-scale sounding at Ashkelon and dated by him to the 4th century B.C.E. (Iliffe 1935), should in fact be re-dated to the late 7th century B.C.E. This reasonable assumption seems to be accepted by other scholars (Uehlinger 1997: 129).

The marketplace, located by the sea, was excavated in an area of over 500 sq. m. It was built on top of the filled quarry (Phase 8 in Grid 50). Both projects, the filling of the quarry and the construction of the marketplace, were undertaken in the late 7th century B.C.E. during a single operation; in other words, the quarry was filled in order to construct a marketplace. This conclusion is further confirmed by the typological and chronological analysis of the pottery assemblage within the fill, mainly the East Greek pottery, which is similar to the assemblage discovered in the marketplace’s debris, sealed by the Babylonian destruction. In a few cases joins were even found between pieces found in the fill and pieces found in the destruction debris. It is therefore clear that “the fills were deposited, the buildings constructed, used briefly, and destroyed completely within the space of a very few years” (Waldbaum 2002a: 60). Or, as Master (2001: 209) puts it, “the seventh century market at Ashkelon probably lasted no more that ten or eleven years, from 615–604.”

The excavated portion of the marketplace yielded a number of buildings separated by drained streets and a plaza. A row of shops flanked one of the streets in the northeastern corner of the excavated area. Based on the finds, one of the shops (Room 423) was identified as a wine shop, while another (Room 431) as a meat shop (an addition, Room 422, contained a number of bird bones). Bordering the plaza, a series of long narrow rooms was excavated and identified as a warehouse, where goods were stored before being put on sale in the shop. South of the warehouse, an administrative unit was unearthed, labeled by the excavators the Counting House. Here, a dozen scale weights of bronze and stone as well as part of the bronze arm and pans from a scale balance for measuring _Hacksilber_ were discovered (Stager 2008: 1585). A number of additional finds unearthed in this area deserve special mention, such as a number of ostraca (Cross 2008) and a few piles of charred wheat, some of which, according to botanical analysis, came from Judah and the Sharon Plain (Weiss and Kislev 2004).

In addition to the winery and marketplace, Stager notes that

the Philistine fortifications, built sometime around 1000 B.C.E., still protected Ashkelon when the Babylonian army approached the seaport four centuries later. On the north

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5. According to Finkelstein, the Philistine fortification system in Ashkelon was not erected before the 8th century B.C.E. (Finkelstein 2007: 520). For similar down-dating of Ekron’s fortification system, see Ussishkin 2005.
slope a thick mantle of sand, soil, and other debris was added to the earlier Bronze Age slope, the crest of which was capped with a series of mud-brick towers connected by a curtain wall. The two towers excavated were 8.00 by 10.50 m and spaced 20 m apart. Presumably this series of towers continued around the rest of the fortification line. If so, then as many as 50 towers fortified the seaport on its land side, just as 53 towers protected the city—along the same line—in the medieval period. This massive fortification system was destroyed in the battle of 604 and not rebuilt until the Hellenistic era. (Stager 2008: 1584)

From the archaeological data described above, one may infer that the 7th century B.C.E. remains discovered in Ashkelon belong almost entirely to a very limited period between 620/615 and 604 B.C.E. Remains from the better part of the 7th century B.C.E., such as the earlier sub-phase of the winery, are extremely scant. This is in sharp contrast to the city of Ekron, where substantial remains from both the first and the second parts of the 7th century B.C.E. were unearthed (Gitin 2003). According to Stager’s estimation, however, during the heyday of the city of Ashkelon, some 12,000–15,000 people or more lived there. Stager suggested that the same number of people lived within Ashkelon’s ramparts during the Middle Bronze I (Middle Bronze IIA; Stager 2008: 1578; 2001: 634) and the 7th century B.C.E. (Stager 2008: 1585). Such estimates clearly take into account the presumably fortified area of Ashkelon in toto. Using the same method, Hakim arrived at some 15,000 inhabitants at Ashkelon for the 6th century C.E. (Hakim 2001: 5, n. 14). If all these estimates are correct, one is forced to conclude that, during different periods in the city’s history, the population remained basically the same, around 15,000 inhabitants.

Based on his regional survey, Shavit arrived at only some 2,000 inhabitants living in Ashkelon during the 10th–9th centuries B.C.E., with almost no rural hinterland around the city (two villages only). He estimated that during this period, the populated area of the city consisted of 10 ha only and covered mainly the top of the mound. For the 8th century B.C.E., Shavit estimated the same 2,000 inhabitants for Ashkelon, although according to his survey, 11 new villages were founded in the vicinity of the city, with an overall estimated population of ca. 1,000 inhabitants. Shavit noted that that in the 7th century B.C.E. there was no substantial change in the number of the settlements surrounding Ashkelon, although the settlement complex for this period seems more consolidated than in the previous period. He estimated the population in the vicinity of the city during the 7th century B.C.E. at ca. 1,500, noting that the population of the city itself was still higher (Shavit 2008: 150–51).

6. Hakim arrives at this number by calculating an estimated area of 57 ha (140 acres) for the city of Ashkelon within its walls, with a gross density of approximately 270 persons per ha (107 persons per acre). It seems, however, that Hakim uses a far-too-high-density coefficient per ha (cf. e.g., Finkelstein 1992; Vink 1997: 121–22). On the other hand, in his opinion, if most of the housing stock in Byzantine Ashkelon was in two-story structures, “then the estimate would yield a net density of approximately eight persons per two-story house, which is not unreasonable for walled cities during that period. It is also possible to assume a density of sixteen persons per four-story structure” (Hakim 2001: 23, n. 14). Given the prescriptions of Julian of Ascalon’s famous treaties for buildings three or four stories high, one may reasonably assume that many such buildings comprised the housing stock of Ashkelon during the Byzantine period (Hakim 2001; 2008). For Early Islamic Ashkelon, see Hoffman 2004.
How can we reconcile all of these contradictory population estimates for the city of Ashkelon during the 7th century B.C.E.? The answer is simple: we cannot. The archaeological evidence for 8th–7th centuries B.C.E. Ashkelon is limited and inconclusive and we lack a number of crucial variables required for any attempt to estimate the population of the city during this period (such as the size of residential areas versus nonresidential areas within the city walls, the expected population density based on median number of households per hectare, etc.). Nevertheless, the answer probably lies between Shavit’s and Stager’s estimates. Still, as Na’aman pointed out on several occasions, even a kingdom with a relatively small territory (such as Gaza or Ashkelon) could have enjoyed enormous prosperity if it took advantage of other factors, such as location, maritime and land routes, and means of transportation, capital, and internal organization which would allow hiring external manpower for work, etc. (Na’aman 1997; 2004; 2009).

This observation is certainly correct, and I have no doubt in the validity of Stager’s “port power” model concerning many periods in Ashkelon’s history. Suffice it to mention Ashkelon’s prominent role during the Middle Bronze I, attested both historically and archaeologically, or during the Amarna period, attested mainly historically (not to mention the periods of prosperity during the Roman or Byzantine periods). In the beginning of the Philistine phase in the history of the city, with a hinterland almost empty of rural settlements, Ashkelon was forced to initiate trade (especially wheat trade) with more distant localities. Thus, it is quite plausible that during the Iron Age I, Ashkelon extended its power (colonized?), or at least significantly tightened its trade connection with the central part of the Israeli coastal plain (Gadot 2008). The appearance of an Ashkelonite enclave in the area of Jaffa in 701 B.C.E. may be the product of a colonization process that started 400 years earlier (Na’aman 1981: 180; Gadot 2006: 31).

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7. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the reliability of methods for estimating population size based on archaeological data. One thing is clear, however: conducting such an endeavor for a site that lacks the basic evidence required to estimate its ancient population will increase the margin of error many times over. For a variety of problems involved in estimating ancient populations, see, e.g., Fekri 1981; Bairoch 1988; Finkelstein 1992; Postgate 1994; Vink 1997; Lipschits 2003; Osborne 2004; Witcher 2005; Faust 2007; Scheidel 2008.

8. Such an observation is particularly appropriate for Gaza, located at the terminus of the Arabian trade route (Bienkowski and van der Steen 2001).

9. Finkelstein 1996; 2000. For the most recent treatment of this topic, see Shavit 2008, according to whom the absence of developed hinterlands around the Philistine city-states may be explained by Aegean concepts of urban settlement, imported by Philistine migrants in the 12th century B.C.E.

10. Two individuals from Ashkelon are attested in Ugarit during the final phase of the Late Bronze Age (RS 19.42; RS 19.91) and it is possible that we are dealing with merchants from Ashkelon doing business in Ugarit (Vidal 2006).

11. According to Na’aman’s more recent reconstruction, the appearance of the Ashkelonite enclave east of Jaffa in the time of Sennacherib’s campaign to Palestine (during the days of Śidqa, king of Ashkelon), is the product of Tiglath-pileser III’s policy, who perhaps transferred Jaffa and the surrounding towns to Rukibtu, king of Ashkelon, in 732 B.C.E. (Na’aman 1998: 219–23; 2009: 352). It should be noted that such a scenario, although entirely plausible, is based on a hypothetical restoration of lines 12–13 in Ann. 18 (Tadmor 2004: 220–21; and see Wazana 2003).
Na’aman has recently offered a comprehensive summary concerning the mention of Ashkelon in the Neo-Assyrian sources (Na’aman 2009). According to Na’aman, the documentary sources indeed point to Ashkelon’s prosperity during the 7th century B.C.E., that is to say, Ashkelon, despite its limited territory, “became one of the most important cities in Palestine in the first half of the first millennium B.C.E.” (Na’aman 2009: 356).

As we have seen, however, archaeological evidence for Ashkelon’s prosperity during the period of Neo-Assyrian domination is not yet attested. Likewise, Ashkelon’s enclave, consisting of Beth Dagon, Jaffa, Bene-Baraq, and Azor, was targeted and most probably confiscated in 701 B.C.E. The loss of the Ashkelonite possessions in the area of the Yarkon may have been a significant blow to the city’s abilities to sustain its population, not to mention the likely loss of status in the eyes of its neighbors.12

Although the evidence concerning tribute-related correspondence between the Assyrians and their vassals is admittedly sparse, it seems that Ashkelon did not feature prominently in this correspondence, and, when documented (Na’aman 2009), its contributions are rather modest compared to other localities in the Southern Levant (cf. Elat 1978; Holladay 2006).

There is little doubt that during the period of Neo-Assyrian domination, Ashkelon was an important city, serving Phoenician trade and mediating in supplying Egyptian goods to the Assyrians for the benefit of all parties involved. However, to single out Ashkelon as the trading hub of the southern Levant13 does little justice to other Palestinian-coast port powers, such as Gaza, Dor, or Acco. Although Yavnah-Yam was most probably not an independent city during the 7th century B.C.E., its excellent harbor should also be taken into consideration. As Malkin, based on Braudel’s concept of réseau, puts it: “a port city may be studied as such, but its very existence implies another port city somewhere else” (Malkin 2009: 390).

Based on the tribute-related correspondence and on the meager archaeological remains from the better part of the 7th century B.C.E. discovered so far at Ashkelon, one concludes that Ashkelon’s enormous prosperity during the period of Neo-Assyrian domination is probably exaggerated. The archaeological remains attesting to Ashkelon’s prosperity come solely from the level that should be dated to the late 7th century B.C.E., that is to say from the period of Egyptian domination at the site.

Greek Pottery from Ashkelon’s 604 B.C.E.

DeSTRUCTION LAYER: Its Chronology and Interpretation

The discovery of relatively large amounts of Greek pottery in the 604 B.C.E. destruction layer has created the impression of flourishing maritime trade, which is

12. It is possible, however, that Ashkelon received its share of Hezekiah’s confiscated lands in the Shephelah in 694/693 B.C.E, together with Ashdod, Ekron, and Gaza (Bull inscription IV, lines 29–30; cf. however, a contradicting statement in the Rassam cylinder, line 53).

13. Thus, according to Tappy (2008: 395), during the period of Neo-Assyrian domination, much of the economic richness of Southern Canaan funneled out to the trading hub at Ashkelon, via Libnah. Likewise, Faust and Weiss (2005) postulated that during the 7th century B.C.E. Ashkelon had a huge Mediterranean port, which was the hub of the local economic system.
then projected to the whole 7th century B.C.E. (e.g., Stager 1996; 2008: 1585; Master 2001; Faust and Weiss 2005). The assemblage includes some 1553 pieces of mainly East Greek origin, with a dozen Early Corinthian sherds (plus an additional fragment of a possible Transitional Corinthian style); it accounts for only about 1% of Ashkelon’s late 7th century B.C.E. ceramic assemblage (Master 2001; 2003: Fig. 3). 14

Following a revised terminology and periodization for East Greek pottery proposed by Kerschner and Schlotzhauer (2005), Waldbaum concluded that the East Greek assemblage from Ashkelon belongs to the South Ionian Archaic Ic (SiA Ic)—South Ionian Archaic Id (SiA Id) horizons (Waldbaum 2007). In Kerschner and Schlotzhauer’s scheme (2005: 8), the SiA Ic lasted roughly between 630/625 and 610 B.C.E, while the SiA Id, lasted between ca. 610 and 580 B.C.E, corresponding to the later part of Cook’s Middle Wild Goat II and to what he reluctantly labeled as Middle Wild Goat III (Cook 1992). In my opinion, however, the majority of Ashkelon’s published East Greek decorated pottery belongs stylistically to the SiA Id rather than to the SiA Ic, with some possible advanced examples of the latter (Fantalkin 2008: 237–47; and see also Kerschner and Schlotzhauer 2005: 35, nos. 84). 15 Such a view is corroborated by the presence of a dozen of what seem to be Early Corinthian sherds in the Ashkelon assemblage and only one fragment of a possible Transitional Corinthian style (Waldbaum 2002a: Fig. 13). Nowadays, in slight contrast to Payne’s (1931) original scheme, in which the Early Corinthian (EC) style was dated between 625 and 600 B.C.E, it is preferable to follow Amyx’s (1988: 428) and Morris’s (1996) corrected dates, which put the EC phase between ca. 620/615 and 595/590 B.C.E. or between ca. 610 and 590 B.C.E, respectively. Likewise, in Amyx’s corrected Corinthian chronology, the Transitional style is dated between ca. 630 and 620/615 B.C.E. It seems that a date around 615/610 B.C.E. for the beginning of EC best fits what we currently know about the development of this style, which, ostensibly, corresponds to the transition between SiA Ic and SiA Id. It is thus clear that, from a chronological point of view, the whole imported Greek assemblage from Ashkelon, belongs to a very narrow period, between ca. 620/615 and 604 B.C.E. This time span perfectly accommodates the duration of the Egyptian...
interlude following the Assyrian withdrawal from *Ebir nāri* in the twenties of the 7th century B.C.E. (Na’aman 1991a: 33–41).

The sudden appearance of East Greek pottery (including coarse ware, such as cooking-pots) on the coastal plain of Israel toward the end of the 7th century B.C.E., with the main spots at Ashkelon and the fortresses of Mezad Ḥashavyahu and Kabri, and its subsequent disappearance after only a few years is best explained as representing Greek mercenaries in the employ of the Egyptians.16 As has been demonstrated on several occasions, local kingdoms were obliged to provide supplies to Greek mercenary units and to cooperate with these Egyptian representatives in every possible way (Na’aman 1991a; 2006; Fantalkin 2001; 2006; Finkelstein 2002). The rationale behind the establishing of the fortresses at Mezad Ḥashavyahu and Kabri, manned by Greek mercenaries, is logistical. These fortresses, and most probably additional hitherto undetected fortresses and administrative centers (such as Tell Keisan?), served as focal points for collecting supplies for the Egyptian troops on their way to the Lebanese coast and northern Syria and on their way back to Egypt. Control of Yavneh-Yam’s harbor, for example, would have been invaluable from the point of view of Egyptian rulers, as it provides the only natural harbour between Tel Ridan south of Gaza and Jaffa (Galili and Sharvit 1991; 2005: 312), and this is the main reason for the establishment of Mezad Ḥashavyahu in the vicinity of Yavneh-Yam. The king of Judah was apparently obliged to supply the corvée labor, at the request of the Egyptian suzerain, for agricultural works in the fields in the vicinity of both sites, similar to the arrangements that existed between Egyptian representatives and local vassals during the Late Bronze Age (Na’aman 1981; 1991a).17 The agricultural produce obtained from these activities was intended for the Greek garrison at Mezad Ḥashavyahu but mainly for the Egyptian navy that transferred the troops along the coast using the maritime route,18 making necessary stops for refreshment and replenishment at Yavneh-Yam’s harbor.

It is in this perspective that we should view the East Greek assemblage discovered at Ashkelon. From both typological and chronological perspectives, the Ashkelon assemblage is quite similar to that discovered at the fortresses of Mezad Ḥashavyahu and Tel Kabri. Surely, the proportions are different, especially with regard to Mezad Ḥashavyahu, where East Greek wares account for about 40% of the ceramic assemblage.19 Also, the Ashkelon assemblage is a bit richer in terms of variety of

16. For a number of perspectives, cf. Na’aman 1991a; Fantalkin 2001; 2006; Niemeier 2001; Finkelstein 2002. Recently, it has been even suggested that the northern and eastern boundaries of “the Land of Canaan” in Num 34:7–12 are actually a reflection of the Asiatic domain of Necho II (Levin 2006). The attempts to attribute independent employment of Greek mercenaries during the late 7th century B.C.E. to Egyptian vassals, be it the Kingdom of Judah (e.g., Wenning 2001) or the Kingdom of Tyre (Niemeier 2002), should be abandoned (Na’aman 1991a; Fantalkin 2006: 202–3; Lipiński 2006: 156, n. 349).

17. A presence of an Egyptian garrison has been postulated for Late Bronze Age Ashkelon, based on the presence of Egyptian pottery and meager architectural remains (Martin 2008; 2009).

18. For the importance of naval forces during the days of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, cf. Lloyd 1972.

19. In terms of absolute statistics, the number of Greek sherds uncovered at Mezad Ḥashavyahu is higher in comparison to what has been uncovered so far in Ashkelon. However, this is meaningless, since comparisons should be made between the estimated numbers of vessels in each category, and for Ashkelon, this statistic is still missing.
Greek pottery forms. The basic trend, however, is perceivable and shows that the lion’s share of these wares belongs to various forms of Knickrandschalen, East Greek (probably Milesian) cooking-pots, Samian/Milesian and related amphorae, and late Middle Wilde Goat II (Si Id) oinochoai.

The attested distribution and the nature of East Greek finds in Palestine are certainly insufficient to prove the existence of a developed Greek pottery trade during the period of Egyptian domination and are better considered as representing Greek mercenaries. Likewise, there are no indications that coarse Aegean wares, particularly the cooking-pots, enjoyed a special reputation in the Southern Levant (Niemeier 2001: 16). Even if Master’s (2001: 168) observation that in terms of thermal properties the Greek cooking-pots of the 7th century B.C.E. were “far superior to cooking pots made from the sands of the Levantine coast” is correct, this fact remained largely unnoticed or simply ignored by local consumers. The basis for scholars’ insistence that East Greek cooking-pots found at Ashkelon, Meződ Hashavyahu, and Tel Kabri were considered desirable luxury commodities by local consumers (e.g., Waldbaum 2002b; Master 2001: 165–69; Stager 2008: 1585) is therefore not clear. The alternative interpretation, which considers these wares additional evidence for the presence of East Greek mercenaries, is better warranted (e.g., Niemeier 2001; Fantalkin 2001).

Waldbaum pointed out on several occasions, however, that it is difficult to imagine mercenary soldiers, already burdened with their armor, carrying breakable pottery for some sentimental reasons (1994; 1997; 2002a; 2002b; 2007). I find it difficult to accept this notion, especially when one considers the amounts of Greek pottery discovered in the Egyptian fortresses of Daphnae (Petrie 1888; Schlotzhauer and Weber 2005; 2006) or T 21 (Migdol? See Oren 1984), both manned by Greek mercenaries during the days of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (Boardman 1980: 133–41; Smoláriková 2002; 2008). There can be no doubt that the mobile units of Kit-tim, that is, units consisting of Greek mercenaries employed by the Egyptians along the Arad–Beer Sheba Valley route and supplied by the Judahites (Na’aman 1991a: 47–48; 2006), made little use of Greek pottery. For apparent reasons, this breakable commodity was of no value to moving troops. However, once stationed as garrisons, these soldiers obviously used the familiar wares alongside the local ones. The...
East Greek assemblage discovered at Ashkelon, therefore, should not be considered a reflection of an encompassing maritime trade and Ashkelon’s enormous wealth during the 7th century B.C.E., but rather as an indication of the presence of the East Greek garrison, on behalf of the Egyptians, located in the city at the very end of this century.24

An additional point that argues in favor of a Greek mercenary garrison in Ashkelon, stationed there on behalf of the Egyptian suzerain, is the restriction imposed on East Greek trade to Naukratis in Egypt (Her. II.179.1).

Archaeologically, the establishment of Naukratis around 615–610 B.C.E. (Cook 1937; Kerschner 2001; Schlotzhauer and Weber 2005; Schlotzhauer and Villing 2006) overlaps with the appearance of East Greek pottery on the Israeli coast (Fantalkin 2006). Starting in 616 B.C.E., and most probably slightly earlier, the entire coastal plain up to Phoenicia should be considered Egyptian domain.25 In these circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that the Egyptians would not have allowed the uncontrolled establishment of East Greek emporia on the Southern Levantine coast, just as they did not allow it in Egypt itself.

Having said this, I do not wish to reject completely the possibility of limited East Greek trade with the coast of Palestine, especially with places like Ashkelon. However, we should consider the possibility that whatever East Greek trade existed during the late 7th century B.C.E., it would have been directed mainly toward the East Greek mercenaries who were stationed in the region (Fantalkin 2006: 207, n. 93). In this case, those East Greek mercenaries were able to receive some familiar goods (wine, oil, pottery),26 otherwise inaccessible in the local environment. Needless to say, Greek traders who brought these goods to places like Ashkelon or Меزاد Ḥashavyahu (via Yavneh-Yam) with the aim and permission from the

24. According to Xanthus, Akiamos, king of Lydia (it is unclear if this should be taken as Ardis of the Heraclid dynasty or not), had a military commander named Askalos, who, during the course of a campaign in Syria, founded the city of Ashkelon (Fr. 23) (Stark 1852: 45–51; van Berg 1972: 97–109). The crucial role played by the Lydians with regard to the thousands of Ionian and Carian mercenaries hired by Psammetichus I is well known already from the Rassam Cylinder, in which Gyges, King of Lydia, is accused by Ashurbanipal of having sent his army to the aid of Psammetichus I (cf. Jer. 46: 9; Her. II.152). If indeed Ashkelon in Philistia is intended in Xanthus’s fragment (for a possible confusion with Daskyleion, see Alexander 1913: 46–50; Hanfmann 1958: 87, nos. 49, 51), this is a scrap of information of particular interest, since in this case, it is possible to draw a connection between the mythical founding of Ashkelon, apparently by the Lydian commander according to the folk tale, and the fact that mercenaries from Ionia (the region under Lydian control), while serving in the Saite army, constituted the main element in the garrison located at Ashkelon on the eve of the Babylonian destruction of 604 B.C.E.

25. In 616 B.C.E., Psammetichus I and his army came to the aid of Assyrian King Sin-shar-ishkun and fought alongside the Assyrians in the far north, in the vicinity of Qablinu (Wiseman 1956: 63; Spalinger 1978: 49–50). Such an expedition, conducted so far from home, probably indicate that Egyptian rule over coastal Palestine was already established prior to 616 B.C.E. (cf. Miller and Hayes 1986: 388–89). In 612 B.C.E., Psammetichus I’s rule extended as far as the Lebanon coast, as attested by various written sources in which tribute brought by the kings of Phoenicia to Egypt is mentioned (Spalinger 1977: 228–29; 1978: 55, n. 27; Na’amani 1991a: 51–52; Lipiński 2006: 156–57; all with additional references).

26. In this regard, one thinks of the possibility that East Greek traders who made their business with the Greek mercenaries located along the Palestinian coast may have supplied courtesans as well, similar to what is attested with regard to the Greek community in Egypt (Her. II.135).
Egyptian authorities to supply the Greek mercenaries stationed there, certainly would not have avoided the possibility of conducting side business with their local counterparts. However, the main point is that such a trade should be considered a by-product and would be impossible without the presence of the initial intended receiver, that is to say, the Greek garrisons stationed in Ashkelon or Mezad Ḥashavyahu.

The underwater survey of Ashkelon’s near-shore sea bottom, accompanied by core samples taken from the inland parts of the mound, have shown that during the 7th century B.C.E, the marketplace at Grid 50 was probably situated on an inlet, enclosed from north and south by two topographical hollows open to the sea, both reaching as far as 200 m inland (Raban and Tur-Caspa 2008: 88–89, esp. Fig. 4.31). According to Raban and Tur-Caspa, the topographic hollow to the south of the inlet in Grid 50 is the most likely spot in which to seek the Canaanite and Philistine inner harbor of Ashkelon. It seems to me, however, that one of the most suitable periods for seeking the inner harbor in the southern hollow to the south of Grid 50 would be in the late 7th century B.C.E, during which the quarry was filled and the marketplace in Grid 50 was erected. In this case, the marketplace was located in the immediate vicinity of the inner harbor (at the distance of some 100 meters). Given the location of this particular marketplace, one cannot discard the possibility that it was specifically designed for the needs of the Greek mercenary community located in the city prior to the Babylonian assault.

Further Evidence for the Presence of an Egyptian Garrison at Ashelon on the Eve of the Babylonian Destruction

The same may even hold true concerning the charred wheat that came from Judah and was discovered at the marketplace of Ashkelon (Weiss and Kislev 2004). That during the Iron Age Ashkelon was forced to obtain a lion’s share of its wheat through trade, including the establishment of the enclave in the area of Jaffa, has already been outlined above. The pile of charred wheat, therefore, that came from the Sharon Plain (or perhaps from a more northern locality) and was discovered at Ashkelon’s market is hardly surprising. It is the Judahite wheat that is of particular interest. Although it can certainly represent normal trade relations between Judah and Ashkelon under the Egyptian umbrella, Faust and Weiss (2005) took this chance evidence further, suggesting that during the Neo-Assyrian period Ashkelon served

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27. Thus, Waldbaum (2007: 64–65), who rejects my attribution of the late 7th century B.C.E. Greek pottery found in Palestine to mercenary activity, suggests that a few pieces of Greek pottery found in Ekron and Timnah were purchased by some adventurous Ekronites and Timnahites “on their occasional shopping trips to Ashkelon, the nearest large emporium for imported goods from around the eastern Mediterranean.” Although the possibility of Greek mercenary activities in Ekron and Timnah should not be dismissed altogether, Waldbaum’s reconstruction is certainly possible. In any case, however, Waldbaum’s scenario does not alter my main conclusion that this pottery arrived in the region during the period of Egyptian domination only due to the presence of Greek mercenaries.

28. One may expect that an additional permanent marketplace would have existed near the city gate; and there is also a possibility that a number of seasonal marketplaces were established in the city’s vicinity from time to time.
as the main hub of the local economic system, funneling, *inter alia*, Judahite wheat into the wider Mediterranean market. It is certainly true that in a later period Ashkelon served as an important hub for a regional wheat trade. However, one could as easily assume that the Judahite wheat represents part of a levy sent by Judah at Egyptian request, for a benefit of the Egyptian East Greek mercenaries stationed in the city, whose responsibilities included, *inter alia*, collecting and protecting supplies for passing Egyptian troops. One thinks in particular of Jaffa, which during the Late Bronze Age served as an Egyptian administrative center with a permanent garrison and also possessed pharaonic royal granaries (*šunuti*; EA 294: 22; Na’aman 1981; Higginbotham 2000: 131; Goren, Finkelstein, and Na’aman 2004: 320–25).

Additional important evidence that may point to the presence of an Egyptian garrison stationed at Ashkelon on the eve of the Babylonian destruction of 604 B.C.E. comes from two recently published ostraca, discovered during the excavations of the site. The first one (Ashkelon 3.3) is an inscription incised in Greek script on a thick body sherd of a storage jar. According to Cross, it was discovered in the 604 B.C.E. destruction level. If so, a Greek inscription of such an early date from a site located in Israel is certainly unique. It reads: ATATO EMI, that is, “I am Atatos’s” (Cross 2008: 367). The letters show archaic features, further confirmed by the date of the archaeological context. Cross acknowledged that despite certain attempts to find parallels for this name, he was unable to locate any. One should not doubt, however, that we are dealing with a proper Greek name and that, most probably, it belonged to a mercenary.

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29. Corroboration for the assumption that Ashkelon may have served as a focal point for wheat exchange, at least on a regional level, may be found in later sources. Thus, in Tosefta Ahilot 18:18 (ed. Zuckermandel, p. 617), we hear that Ashkelonians “sell wheat in their basilicas.” More so, in a version of Jerusalem Talmud, namely in Shvi’iṭ 6:1, 36c (see also Yevamot 7:2, 8a), we hear the statement of Rabbi Pinchas son of Ya’ir who said: “we used to go down to the market (*sidki* = סידקי) of Ashkelon and buy wheat and go back to our towns” (Neusner, 5: 205; and see Goodblatt 1994: 268–69; for the discussion concerning the word *sidki* and its possible meaning, which most probably should be taken as a warehouse for grain, see Rosenfeld and Menirav 2005: 45–50).

30. Yadin’s interpretation of the inscription on the bowl from Arad as Greek (Yadin 1974: 30–32) remains highly uncertain. The same holds true for a couple of supposedly Greek letters inscribed on pottery sherds found in the Babylonian destruction layer of Jerusalem (Sass 1990).

31. Due to the special importance of this inscription, I asked for an additional opinion, which was kindly provided by Ephraim Lytle; according to him (personal communication):

Despite affording no obvious etymology, this is an interesting name, in all likelihood properly Greek. There is some disagreement in the scholarship about the names in Ατ- preserved in Ancient Greek. This is owed in part to Zgusta’s discussion (1955: 297–300; §596), which suggests a common origin for a whole range of names in Ατ- as well as Αττ- , a notion properly dismissed by, among others, Robert, who likewise rejects the suggestion that all of the names in Ατ- attested in late Archaic and Classical Greece are of non-Greek origin (1963: 528–30). Hence, while the name Ατότης, frequently attested in the Black Sea in the 4th century, is Paphlagonian, there is no reason to follow either Lauffer (1956: 133) in suggesting that the name Ατό in the epitaph of an Athenian woman is a shortened form of the Paphlagonian name introduced into Attica by foreign miners, or Wilamowitz-Möllendorff (1937: 262) in arguing that the Argive sculptor Ατότος named in a late archaical dedication from Olympia (ἸΩ 631 late 6th/early 5th century B.C.E.) is a Scythian sculptor granted Argive citizenship. Robert would see these names as related instead “to one or another Greek words in Ατ-,” adding as a further parallel the Ατός named on a 5th-century B.C.E. lead tablet unearthed in the middle of the last century at Selinous (IGASMG I² 63.18; Masson, not seeing any obvious etymology, remains non-committal [1990: 143]). Our Atatos would likewise seem to suggest the Greek origin of certain proper names in Ατ- , and indeed here we can offer as
Another ostracon (Ashkelon 1.14), which is of special interest although originating from a post-destruction context, was likewise attributed by Cross (2008: 348–49) to the years before the 604 B.C.E. destruction of Ashkelon. It bears a Neo-Philistine inscription, inscribed on a broken part of storage jar, and reads: “Belonging to Kanūpî the man-at-arm[s].” Cross pointed out that, most probably, we are dealing with an Egyptian mercenary, noting Stager’s personal communication that “Ashkelon no doubt called on Egypt for military aid in face of Nebuchadrezzar’s host marching on Philistia” (Cross 2008: 348–49, citing the Saqqārah Aramaic Papyrus [KAI 266] as a parallel).

The famous Saqqārah letter of Adon, probably king of Ekron (Porten 1981), to the pharaoh, certainly shows that some Egyptian clients in Palestine requested military assistance from their suzerain in the face of the approaching Babylonian army. In the case of Ashkelon, however, it seems that mercenaries like Atatos and Kanūpî were already stationed in the city prior to the Babylonian assault. Nebuchadrezzar’s march against Ashkelon in Kislev 604 B.C.E. was probably very swift and left no time for the arrival of Egyptian military aid (below). The attested presence of the Egyptian soldier Kanūpî stationed in Ashkelon prior to the destruction as well as a variety of the Egyptian cult artifacts found in the city (above), demonstrate that, although the majority of Ashkelon’s garrison consisted of Greek mercenaries, Egyptian soldiers were prominently present in the late 7th-century B.C.E. Ashkelon, and of some of them may have served as the officers in charge of the Greek contingent. That the Greek mercenaries may have received direct orders from the Egyptian commanders, or from Judahite or Philistine officials who were forced to collaborate with the Egyptian authorities, is not surprising. One thinks of Potasimto (Pedin-samtawi), a commander of the foreign mercenaries under Psammetichus II, or of the šr of Mezad Ḥashavyahu, or of the Kittim, acting in the midst of Judahite territory. Nowadays, the idea that East Greek garrisons were stationed by the Egyptians in Mezad Ḥashavyahu and Tel Kabri is accepted by many scholars. From here, one needs to take one additional logical step forward to suggest that not only was a Greek mercenary garrison stationed in Ashkelon on the eve of the Babylonian destruction but also that the presence of this garrison was itself the main reason for the destruction of the city in Kislev 604 B.C.E. Additional evidence a roughly contemporaneous archaic graffito from the Athenian Agora preserving the strikingly similar name Αταταίας (Agora 21 F 4, ca. 650–625 B.C.E.). More speculatively, we might note that while names preserved on the Linear B tablets such as a-ta-o and a-to are frequently resolved as Αντάος or Ανός they could as easily be construed as Ατατός and Ατος (DMic, s.v. a-ta-o, a-to). As for the meaning of our Greek Ατατός’ name, unfortunately I cannot see that much can be said. Although it is tempting, given the possible mercenary context of this sherd, to see some kind of pun on a word like Ατατός/Ατος, insatiable, used in Homer especially of “Ares insatiable in war” (Iliad 5.388: Ἀρης ἄτος πολέμοι), as an etymology this strikes me as linguistically improbable.

32. The name is found several times in the Elephantine papyri (Kornfeld 1978: 82). Likewise, we are told by Plutarch that Eudoxus, a famous astronomer and mathematician from Cnidos from the first half of 4th century B.C.E., was instructed by a priest of Memphis, whose name was Chonuphis (Moralia 354E). For additional instances of the use of the Egyptian name Chonuphis in the Classical sources, see Parthey 1864: 32, s.v. Chonuphis.

33. For additional options concerning the identification of Adon’s kingdom, see further references in Katzenstein 1983; Lipschits 2005: 42, n. 19.
It seems that on the way to Ashkelon, the Babylonians destroyed the fortress at Tel Kabri, which was manned by Greek soldiers in the service of Egypt. As is evident from its archaeological record, the Greek garrison stationed at Mezad Hashavyahu simply abandoned the fortress in face of the approaching Babylonian army, most probably in order to join the garrison of Ashkelon.\textsuperscript{34} One may assume that even if Aga, the last acting King of Ashkelon, was willing to submit to the yoke of Babylonia (like the other kings of Hatti), the circumstances—the presence of the Egyptian garrison in the town—made this possibility unlikely.\textsuperscript{35} The Egyptian garrison, consisting of Greek mercenaries (but not only), a source of pride and power during the Egyptian interlude, has suddenly turned into a burden.

\textit{The Rationale behind Nebuchadnezzar’s Attack}

One may object that contrary to the information on the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C.E, the Babylonian chronicle makes no mention of the Egyptian garrison in Ashkelon:

The first year of Nebuchadnezzar (II): In the first month of Sivan he mustered his army and marched to Hattu. Until the month Kislev he marched about victoriously in Hattu. All the kings of Hattu came into his presence and he received their vast tribute. He marched to Ashkelon and in the month Kislev he captured it, seized its king, plundered [and sac]ked it. He turned the city into a ruin heap. In the month of Shebat he marched away and [returned] to Babylon. (after Grayson 1975: 100, lines 15–20)

As pointed out by many scholars, however, the Babylonian inscriptional tradition is remarkably different from its Assyrian predecessors (cf. Hoskisson and Boswell 2004). The military activity of the Babylonian kings was not the most important issue in their inscriptions (Van Seters 1997: 60; Vanderhooft 1999: 2223; Eph’al 2003: 178; Wright 2008: 447). Concerning the battle of Carchemish, the chronicle is more specific, stating that the Egyptian army was encamped at Carchemish. Unlike Ashkelon’s garrison, however, it is obvious that in Carchemish the Babylonians encountered the major Egyptian expeditionary military force. The significance of this victory for Nebuchadnezzar, who at the time of the battle of Carchemish was still a crown prince, was certainly outstanding. The destruction of Ashkelon, on the other hand, should be seen as Nebuchadnezzar’s successful attempt to crash the remaining pockets of Egyptian presence on the Palestinian coast.

\textsuperscript{34} As I tried to demonstrate elsewhere, the finds at Mezad Hashavyahu fit nicely a pattern known as a “planned abandonment without anticipated return” (Fantalkin 2001: 10–49, 144). In this kind of evacuation there are many logistical difficulties (cf. Stevenson 1982; Thorne 2001: 245–46) and usually, some vessels of particular value are taken away at the time of the abandonment. The spatial analyses of Mezad Hashavyahu finds have shown, for instance, that the East Greek oinochoai were not present in the “de facto refuse,” related to the abandonment of the site, but only in the “secondary refuse,” which represents the phases of the fort’s existence. Most probably, all these vessels were carried away by Mezad Hashavyahu’s Greek mercenaries to Ashkelon.

\textsuperscript{35} Is it possible that the Babylonians took a note of these particular circumstances, sparing the life of Aga’s sons? Aga’s sons are mentioned in the ration list of Nebuchadnezzar’s court, in a tablet dated to 592 B.C.E. (Weidner 1939: Pls. I: Line 4; II: line 6). For comparative perspective concerning forced participations in alliances during the period of Neo-Assyrian domination, see Na’aman 1991b.
At first glance, the decision to attack Ashkelon in the month of Kislev (November/December), that is, at the beginning of the winter season, seems rather reckless. However, after a closer examination it should be considered a wisely calculated move. The choice of season was probably not left to chance, for it was the period when the worst winter storms began (Pryor 1992: 3, passim; Gil 2008: 259–64) and, according to Goitein (1967: 316), during the winter season, even for a short voyage from Jaffa or Ashkelon to Egypt, one waited until the “the time of the opening of the sea.”

It seems that by attacking Ashkelon in Kislev 604 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar and his generals virtually eliminated the possibility that the Egyptians would send military aid to Ashkelon’s garrison by sea.

The choice of season for the attack, however, is surely not the sole indicator of the military prowess of Nebuchadnezzar II and his staff. The coastal location of Ashkelon made it of highest strategic importance and leaving the Egyptian garrison, consisting mainly of Greek mercenaries, in the midst of a new Babylonian frontier would have endangered the whole project of occupying the southern part of the country. Ashkelon’s fortifications, already briefly discussed above, were probably quite impressive, and if Stager (2008: 1584) is correct in his assumption that as many as 50 towers fortified the city on its landward side before 604 B.C.E.,

the Babylonians would have needed significant force to accomplish the destruction.

Although the Greek mercenaries who were stationed at Mezad Ḥashavayahu probably retreated to Ashkelon from the approaching Babylonian army, this reinforcement was insignificant in the face of the attacking Babylonian war-machine and without any help from Egypt the Ashkelonian garrison was doomed. However, if the Egyptian garrison had been large enough, with a workable system of replenishment of stocks (both of manpower and provisions), the fate of the city might have been different, at least temporarily. Suffice it to mention that Ashkelon, with its Fatimid garrison, stood for more than half a century (between 1099 and 1153 C.E.) as a “thorn in the flesh of the [Crusader] kingdom” (Prawer 1972: 21; and see Hoch 1992; Lev 1991: 103, 126–27). Nebuchadnezzar’s insistence on the utter destruction of Ashkelon already in his first regnal year, due to the presence of an Egyptian garrison there, therefore prevented the possibility of turning the city into a base for Egyptian operations during the period of Babylonian domination in the southern Levant.

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36. Tamuz (2005), however, suggests that while coastal navigation was brought to a standstill in the winter, open-water routes were open for navigation in summer and winter alike. Even so, the potential dangers of winter navigation in both directions, to and from Egypt along the Palestinian coast, including the risk of disembarking in the southern ports of Palestine during winter storms, can hardly be overestimated.

37. For Ashkelon’s fortifications during the crusaders’ period and their design, which followed the master plan created in the earlier periods, see Boas 1999: 43–44, with further references.

38. Interestingly, although Ashkelon was the last to fall into the hands of the Crusaders, another longstanding stronghold was at Tyre, captured by the Crusaders only in 1124 C.E., after five months of siege, which is significantly later than the other coastal cities to the north of Ashkelon associated with the Fatimids. In 1124 C.E., however, the Fatimids were not able to arrange a fleet that would come to the rescue of Tyre and the city was doomed. If one recalls the lengthy Babylonian siege of Tyre, probably between the years 586/585 and 573/2 B.C.E. (Ephʿal 2003), the similarities between the fates of both Ashkelon and Tyre through the ages, that is to say their abilities
Conclusions

To conclude, the goal of the present study has been to demonstrate that the best possible explanation for the Babylonian destruction of Ashkelon in Kislev 604 B.C.E. should be sought in the Babylonian desire to eliminate an Egyptian garrison located in the town and consisting mainly of Greek mercenaries. Toward that end, the Babylonians wisely calculated the best possible season for such an operation; all this in order to crush the remaining Egyptian strongholds in Palestine and to prevent Ashkelon with its Egyptian garrison from becoming a thorn in the flesh of the southern frontier of the Babylonian empire. Needless to say, such a severe punitive campaign, undertaken in the first regnal year of Nebuchadnezzar, sent a powerful message to the other kingdoms in the region. Apparently, however, the lesson was not learned, and soon a number of additional kingdoms and their sovereigns would share the fate of Ashkelon under Babylonian rule.

Addendum: Antimenidas at the Walls of Ashkelon?

The notion concerning Antimenidas’s enrollment in the Babylonian army (Lobel-Page Fr. 350) has reached us via Stabo (13.2.3), according to whom “Mitylene produced famous men: in olden times Pittacus, one of the Seven Wise Men; and the poet Alcaeus, and his brother Antimenidas, who according to Alcaeus performed a great feat while fighting as ally of the Babylonians and rescued them from trouble by killing a warrior who, he says, was only one palm’s breadth short of five royal cubits.” Strabo, in quoting what is assumed to be Alcaeus’s original poem, refers to Antimenidas as “Βαβυλονίοις συμμαχοῦσα,” i.e., “fighting alongside the Babylonians.” The source, however, is not free of difficulties, and there are reasons to believe that Strabo was not necessarily faithful to Alcaeus’s original version (Fantalkin 2008: 417–20). More so, even if the source is reliable, we must remember that Alcaeus’s lyric poems were basically designed for performance on specific occasions (symposia) and for a specific aristocratic audience, consisting largely of selected members of the Mytilene aristocracy, accompanied by the hetaerae (Rösler 1985; Bowie 1986; Nagy 2004). These sympotic songs are characterized by role playing, in which the “I” of the poet is not necessarily autobiographical and is occasionally to be understood as an assumed identity rather than a faithful representation of his own personality and deeds. In the framework of the genre, the poet is permitted to don a number of poetic masks, while pretending to identify with the fictitious characters who are often merely his own literary creations (Dover 1964; Rösler 1980). Likewise, even if real people are involved, there is no certainty that the descriptions and contexts portray their actual deeds. Individuals and their names may be utilized by the poet to suit the needs of the specific work in which they are mentioned.

to become sources of trouble for any occupying power due to direct access to the sea, is striking (cf. Elat 1978: 34). It seems that Nebuchadnezzar’s insistence on Ashkelon’s destruction and Tyre’s submission is in line with the assumption that these port cities were considered potentially dangerous for the Babylonian goals. But if Nebuchadnezzar would not have destroyed Ashkelon with its Egyptian garrison already in Kislev 604 B.C.E., it had the potential to become “another Tyre” for the Babylonians for years to come.
Thus, many classicists cast doubt upon the historicity of the lyrical poems, i.e., on whether the events described therein actually occurred (cf. Slings 1990; 2000; Owen 2003; Nagy 2004; Edmunds 2007).

The prevailing view holds, however, that Antimeneses was not just a high-ranking mercenary in the Babylonian army but that he also personally participated in Nebuchadrezzar’s punitive campaign against Ashkelon in 604 B.C.E. Upon what evidence is this based? Many believe that this is found in Fragment 48 of Alcaeus, which was discovered among the Oxyrhynchus papyri (Lobel-Page Fr. 48). However, all that has been preserved in this papyrus are fragments of sentences in which there is reference to Babylon and Ashkelon in the context of war. In view of the assumption that Alcaeus was active between ca. 620 and 570 B.C.E., it is likely that his poem indeed commemorates the destruction of Ashkelon by the Babylonians in 604 B.C.E. It was Quinn who first proposed that the references to Ashkelon and Babylon in Fragment 48 of Alcaeus should be linked to the known fact that according to Alcaeus’s Fragment 350, Antimeneses was a mercenary in the Babylonian army (Quinn 1961). According to Quinn, based upon Fragment 48, one may assume that Antimeneses participated personally in the destruction of Ashkelon. As logical as this assumption might appear, over time it took on a life of its own and was presented by many scholars as a historical “fact”; this despite the fact that in Fragment 48 of Alcaeus, Antimeneses is not mentioned at all.

In fact, due to the nature of the surviving sources, there are numerous ways to interpret Alcaeus’s verses concerning Antimeneses’s enrollment in the Babylonian army. Thus, the lines on the return of Antimeneses from the far corners of the earth; about the battle with a Goliath-like figure; of saving the Babylonians from disaster: all these may not stem from Alcaeus’s desire to glorify his brother’s deeds but rather might reflect intentional mockery of Antimeneses’s achievements—pure sarcasm for which Alcaeus was so notoriously famous (cf. Gomme 1957: 256–57; Andrisano 2001: 59; Dench 2005: 266). Is it possible that Antimeneses, like the rest of the Greek mercenaries in the East during the Archaic period, served in the Egyptian army but fell into Babylonian captivity during the course of one of the battles? And is it possible that some time later, after he returned to Mytilene, his brother Alcaeus received him with a particularly sarcastic poem for the amusement of all those at the feast at which it was presented? Whatever the answer, one thing is clear: all of the historical reconstructions concerning the possible employment of Greek mercenaries in the Babylonian army, based as they are upon Alcaeus’s poem, remain uncertain (for detailed discussion, see Fantalkin 2008: 416–25; Fantalkin and Lytle forthcoming).

39. Tandy (2004: 190), for instance, even hypothesized that Antimeneses was first an epikouros of the pharaoh in the area of Ashkelon, but following the Egyptian defeat, remained in the area and offered his services to the Babylonian king. According to another view, also quite speculative, it is possible that Alcaeus himself was a mercenary for a certain time in the Egyptian army (Page 1959: 223, n. 2).
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