

ASHQELON

NATIONAL PARK



Welcome to Ashqelon

National Park

Ashqelon National Park is located on the southern coastal plain, on the western calcareous sandstone (*Kurkar*) ridge. Within it is a sandy area as well as an actual beach.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) maintains the park as a heritage site as well as a place for visitors to enjoy leisure time in the heart of nature.

Early Ashqelon was located astride the ancient Via Maris, the Way of the Sea, a road that linked Syria and Egypt, and was therefore an important station for maritime and overland commerce.

An abundance of fresh water wells (some 60 within the park), a comfortable climate, and fertile soil, ensured Ashqelon a well-developed agricultural hinterland. The combination of all of these factors transformed Ashqelon into a major city, a status it maintained for thousands of years.

"Ashqelon is an important city on the coast. Sycomore trees grow there in abundance and are excellent in size...Ashqelon is a marvelous city...pleasant and constructed in good taste." (From the description of Ashqelon by the geographer al-Makdisi, in 985 CE).

Vestiges of the city from various periods are found within the national park.

The first excavations of Ashqelon were carried out between 1921-1922 by Prof. John Garstang, who discovered the Roman basilica. Since 1985, an archaeological dig has been underway, directed by Prof. Lawrence Stager of Harvard University.

The History of Ashqelon

The name Ashqelon apparently comes from the word *shekel*, a unit of weight, an appropriate name for a city with a major commercial port.

Finds from the Neolithic period show that settlement in Ashqelon began some

10,000 years ago. An actual city was founded in Ashqelon during the Middle Canaanite period (2000-1550 BCE). The length of the city was 1100 meters and its width was 600 meters (its area was approximately 600 dunams) and it was surrounded by a gigantic glacis (an inclined fortified defense wall) that can still be seen today.

The Merneptah bas-reliefs from Karnak, Egypt tell us that during the Late Canaanite period (1550-1200 BCE), Ashqelon was a fortified city under Egyptian rule. However, thus far few artifacts and no remains of fortifications have been discovered from this period.

During the Israelite period I (1200-1000 BCE) Ashqelon was one of the five Philistine cities. It is mentioned in the biblical eulogy of David for Saul and Jonathan:

**"Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashqelon,
lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad, lest the daughters of the
uncircumcised rejoice"** (2 Sam. 1:20).

Ashqelon is also linked to the biblical exploits of Samson, who struck down 30 Philistines and took their clothing in order to pay the thirty companions who had solved a riddle he had proposed at his wedding feast (Judges 14:11-19).

During the Israelite period II (1000-586 BCE), Ashqelon continued to be a Philistine city. From the Bible and other sources we learn that Ashqelon took part in the struggle against the kingdom of Assyria: Zedka, the ruler of Ashqelon, joined the revolt of King Hezekiah of Judah in 701 BCE. In response to the revolt, the Assyrian king Sennecherib attacked Ashqelon and replaced Zedka with a ruler of his choosing. In 604 BCE, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar arrived in Ashqelon. He exiled Aga, Ashqelon's Philistine king, and destroyed the city.

The finds from the excavations of Tel Ashqelon verify that Ashqelon was a Philistine city, smaller in size than the Canaanite city that preceded it. During the Persian period (586-332 BCE), Ashqelon flourished as a city of commerce under the patronage of the port city of Tyre (a city in present-day Lebanon). The artifacts uncovered in the excavations show that the Phoenicians settled in the city; in the southwest part of the national park a cemetery was discovered in which some 1000 dogs were buried. This was apparently a Phoenician custom connected to healing rites.

During the Hellenistic period (332-37 BCE), Ashqelon was an independent city and it remained so even while the area was controlled by the Hasmoneans. Coins minted in the city and discovered in the excavations are testimony to this fact, as the minting of coins was the prerogative of independent cities only.

During the Roman period (37 BCE-324 CE), Ashqelon reached its heyday as a regional commercial center. The area of the city was once again 600 dunams, its length 1100 meters and its width 600 meters. During the Late Roman period, the city wall was built on top of the Middle Canaanite period glacis; the city retained this form during later periods as well. Villages and farmhouses surrounded it, and grain, dates, grapes, and vegetables were raised. A special kind of onion was grown here, its name – scallion – deriving from the name of the city of Ashqelon.

The Byzantine period (324-638 CE) saw Ashqelon develop into a center for trade in fine wine, which it exported to Europe through its port.

In the Madaba map, a sixth century CE church mosaic depicting cities of the Holy Land and discovered in Madaba, Jordan, the northeastern portion of Ashqelon appears, including the Jerusalem Gate flanked by towers, a square, a public building and two main, intersecting streets, the Cardo that ran the length of the city, and the main cross-street, the Decamanus.

The Jews of Ashqelon

It is known that Jews were living in Ashqelon for several decades before the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans (66-71 CE). According to Josephus Flavius, 2500 Jews were murdered in Ashqelon during the revolt.

It is not clear when Jewish settlement resumed in Ashqelon. Archaeological evidence suggests there was a Jewish community in the city during the Byzantine period, from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Among the artifacts pointing to the existence of Ashqelon's Jewish community, two synagogue inscriptions mentioning donors are of note. One is inscribed on a stone column and another on a stone lattice. An uninscribed stone synagogue lattice was also discovered, carved with a seven-branched candelabrum, a shofar (ram's horn), and a lulav (palm branch). Two additional inscriptions may have also originated in the synagogue. One is a list of 24 names of priestly families that served in

A stone lattice depicting a seven-branched candelabrum, a shofar (ram's horn), and a lulav (palm branch), adorned an Ashqelon synagogue.



the Temple, and the other is an inscription in Aramaic mentioning a donor. The base of a marble column from a fourth century synagogue bearing a carved a seven-branched candelabrum, a shofar, and a citron was also discovered. None of these finds are to be seen in the national park at present.

The Muslims conquered Ashqelon in the seventh century. Beginning in the eleventh century, they accorded it special status because of a reliquary structure, known in Arabic as a *mashad*. According to tradition, the head of Hussein ibn Ali, a grandson of Mohammad, was kept in this structure. (Hussein ibn Ali's body is buried in Karbala, Iraq.)

Muslim Ashqelon was also important as the first fortified city at the point of entrance to Palestine from Egypt. Ashqelon reached the height of its fortification in the mid-twelfth century, when the Muslim rulers of the Fatimid dynasty built

a mighty wall around the city. This wall was partially destroyed by the Muslim warrior Saladin, who demolished the city to prevent its falling into the hands of his enemies, the Crusaders. Ashqelon was refortified and partially rebuilt by the Crusader leader Richard the Lionheart in 1192 CE and by Richard, earl of Cornwall (brother of King Henry III), in 1241. Remains of these walls can still be seen.

Short Touring Routes (approximately one hour each)

1. From the Roman basilica and semicircular hall, the waterwheel and well, and the St. Mary Viridis Church, to the lookout on the Muslim and Crusader walls.
2. From the Canaanite gate parking lot to the Dolphin parking lot via the cliff trail overlooking the sea.
3. The Wall Trail: From the remains of the St. Mary Viridis Church along the remains of the city wall to the seaside end of the wall.

Tel Ashqelon

During the Middle Canaanite period, Ashqelon was a major port city, whose inhabitants made their living from agriculture and exported wine, olive oil, henna, sheep, and cattle to the countries of the Mediterranean basin. Ahead of you is the **glacis**, a gigantic slanted earthen rampart dating from the Middle Canaanite Period (2000-1550 BCE). The glacis is 2200 meters long and 15 meters high.

The Canaanite City Gate: This gate contains the oldest arch in the world, constructed during the Middle Canaanite period around 1850 BCE. People arriving at Ashqelon would pass through the gate and its arched corridor. In addition to the gate and the glacis, the fortifications of Canaanite Ashqelon included walls and a moat.

An important remnant that cannot clearly be seen at present is the **Canaanite city shrine**. This small shrine was discovered outside the gate, on the slope descending towards the sea. Inside, the figurine of a calf was found. The 10.5-cm-tall figurine, made of bronze overlayed with silver, was discovered within a clay box. The calf was a symbol of the Canaanite deity Ba'al and the shrine may have served the Ba'al-worshipping residents of the city. The figurine is on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; a copy can be seen in the Ashqelon Museum.

Though Ashqelon's ancient port has not been excavated, scholars assume that the shrine to Ba'al was located on the way to the port. Thus, those embarking on a sea voyage or those disembarking after one could pray or give thanks to the deity for the success of their journey.



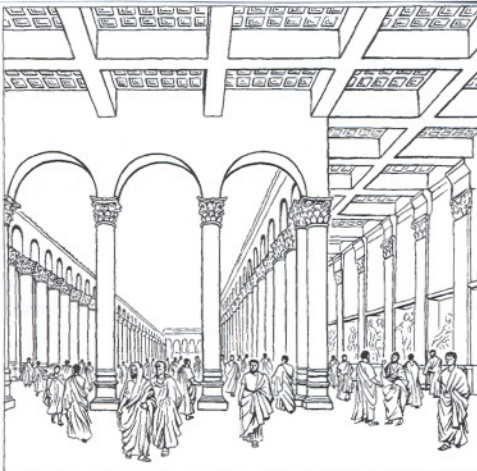
The Roman Basilica

Park your car in the main parking lot (the basilica parking lot) and tour the ruins on foot.

In the center of the national park are the remains of a colonnaded structure dating from the Roman period (the third century CE). This was Ashqelon's basilica – a courtyard whose walls and floor were covered with marble and which was surrounded by rows of columns and chambers. The basilica was 100 meters long and 35 meters wide. Here was where the public activity of Ashqelon took place: citizens met in order to do business and conduct their social life, performances were held, as well as military exercises and religious ceremonies. South of the basilica was a semicircular chamber with bleachers. This chamber may have served as the meeting hall for the town council, known as the *bouletarion*.



The remains of the Roman basilica



Artist's rendering of the Roman basilica,
third century CE.

Marble statues discovered in the excavation of the basilica adorned the entrance to the semicircular hall. The statues can be seen in the remains of the semicircular hall.

The Statue of Nike - Nike was the winged Roman goddess of victory. Her head



is crowned with a wreath and in her arms is the god Atlas, standing atop a globe. Another statue of Nike depicts the goddess holding a palm branch.

The Statue of Isis - Isis was an Egyptian goddess, appearing here in the form of Tyche, the city's goddess of fortune. She wears a crown and holds a priest of the Egyptian god Serapis.

The Waterwheel and Well

A waterwheel, known as an *antilia*, and well are located north of the basilica (across the road).

This type of a waterwheel well utilized cogwheels and animal power (a camel or a donkey) to raise water from a well. The animal moved a horizontal beam to which a horizontal cogwheel was attached. The horizontal cogwheel moved a vertical cogwheel that in turn moved a kind of "conveyor belt" – a chain to which clay jars or wooden boxes were attached – that reached into the well. These containers brought water up from the well and poured it into a channel connected to a pool. From the pool, the water flowed to irrigation channels (which did not survive) and on to agricultural plots.

During the Ottoman period, this waterwheel and others like it served the farmers of the Arab village of Jora. The device has been partially restored.

An additional *antilia* waterwheel and well, with an explanatory sign, is located in the southern part of the sea parking lot (on the way down to the beach).

The church and the walls of Ashqelon, located on the eastern side of the national park, may be reached on foot or by car.

The Saint Mary Viridis Church

The remains of the St. Mary Viridis Church, constructed during the Byzantine period in the fifth century, can be seen next to the wall.

The church was still in use during part of the Early Muslim period (638-1099 CE), but was destroyed by a crowd of angry Muslims and Jews in 938 CE. It remained in ruins until the Crusaders restored it after 1153 CE.

The church was originally built in the basilica style, with six granite columns supporting a balcony and pitched roof. During the Crusader period, the structure was changed to include four columns and an arched roof. Remains of frescoes discovered on the walls depict four saints holding scrolls inscribed in Greek.

The Wall of Ashqelon

The wall of Ashqelon can be seen on the southern and eastern sides of the national park. It dates to the mid-twelfth century CE Muslim city built by the Fatimids to fortify themselves against the Crusaders. The wall was constructed atop the huge Canaanite glacis (as was the Roman-Byzantine wall that preceded it).

When the Crusaders conquered Ashqelon, they strengthened the walls and even rebuilt a portion of them, as they did other structures in the city. They also built a fortress on the southwest part of the city.

The walls had four gates, as did the Byzantine city. They were named for their directions: the Sea Gate, the Gaza Gate, the Jerusalem Gate, and the Jaffa Gate.

The Beach and the Ancient Port

The beach and the ancient port are located on the southwestern side of the national park, below the Dolphin parking lot.

Portions of the Muslim (Fatimid) and the Crusader wall, in which they inserted Roman columns to strengthen it can be seen along the beach. Recent research shows that Ashqelon's ancient port was not a constructed one. That is, vessels anchored a few hundred meters off shore, taking advantage of calcareous sandstone shoals or underwater rocks to secure their anchors. Merchandise was ferried from ship to shore by small boats. When ships needed to come ashore for repair or storage, lifting devices and portable ramps were used.

Vegetation

Ashqelon National Park is situated on the western calcareous sandstone (*Kurkar*) ridge, made of sand, red loam, and sediment. Sand dunes are to be found in the southern part of the park. Sweet ground water is located close to the surface. The climate is Mediterranean, with an annual rainfall of approximately 473 mm.

The primary natural vegetation in Ashkelon and its environs once included common olive (*Olea europaea*), lentisk (*Pistacia lentiscus*), terebinth tree, (*Pistacia Palaestina*), shrubby saltbush (*Atriplex halimus*), Christ's thorn jujube (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), white broom (*Retama rietum*), and twisted acacia (*Acacia raddiana*), all of which were decimated during the process of settling the area. Remains of edible vegetation have been found on Tel Ashkelon, including wine grapes, olive,

carob, pomegranate, almond, fig, wheat, and barley.

The natural vegetation characteristic of Ashkelon and its environs at present includes white broom, Christ's thorn jujube, species of tamarisk (*Tamarix spp*)

Schweinfurth boxthorn (*Lycium schweinfurthii*), and sand wormwood (*Artemisia monosperma*). Sycomore (*Ficus sycomorus*), white acacia (*Acacia albidia*), and white sallow (*Acacia saligna*), also grow in the reserve.

Boxthorn thrives on the cliff above the sea, as well as shrubby saltbush. Both are suited to the area's wind conditions, salt spray, red loam, and sand.

A sycomore tree





Middle Canaanite Period 1 2200-2000	Middle Canaanite Period 2 2000-1550	Late Canaanite Period 1550-1200	Israelite 1200-586	Persian 586-332	Hellenistic 332-37
BCE					

Roman 37 BCE-324 CE	Byzantine 324-638	Early Muslim 638-1099	Crusader 1099-1291	Late Muslim 1291-1516	Ottoman 1516-1917
CE					