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CHAPTER 1

‘AKKO-PTOLEMAIS—A MARITIME CITY AT THE CROSSROADS OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS UNTIL ROMAN TIMES

NADAV KASHTAN

Among the ancient cities of the Land of Israel, ‘Akko is one of the richest in both history and material culture. Written sources referring to ‘Akko cover about 5000 years from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages to modern times.

In 1988 I published an article entitled “Akko-Ptolemais: A Maritime Metropolis in Hellenistic and Early Roman Times” (Kashtan 1988). The present introductory chapter is an opportunity to re-examine the main ideas expressed in that article concerning the dominant status of ‘Akko-Ptolemais in Hellenistic and Roman times. As a background to the following chapters of this volume, which discuss the extensive excavations in ‘Akko, the introduction examines the ever-changing history of ‘Akko until Roman times in broad historical and cultural contexts.

To commence, the geographical features of ‘Akko and their implication on its history are dealt with. Then ‘Akko’s destiny in wars and conflicts between various empires and rulers of the Near East becomes the focus. Finally, a more detailed examination of ‘Akko since the Hellenistic period attempts to show why and how ‘Akko acquired its particular position as a maritime city on the crossroads of Phoenician, Greek and Roman civilizations.

HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AKKO’S GEOGRAPHY

The traditional Greek perception, as expressed by Aristotle and Plato, was that natural conditions and geographical features determine the success or failure of the *polis*. Their model of thought was naturally Athens, but it applied equally to other major *poleis*, as seen by their history. This is also the case of ‘Akko-Ptolemais in Greco-Roman times. The original city was founded on a small hill called today *Tell el-Fukhar* (Arabic, ‘hill of shards’), Tel ‘Akko or ‘Napoleon’s Hill’, in the northern littoral of the Land of Israel. ‘Akko (Acre) is bordered from the east by the plain of

‘Akko, surrounded in turn by the hills of the Western Galilee, Mount Carmel and the promontory of the Ladder of Tyre. ‘Akko’s proximity to the *Via Maris* and to seafaring routes undoubtedly contributed to the long-lasting importance of the city and its port.

The ancient tell of ‘Akko dominated the plain of ‘Akko and the large territories that were part of its agricultural hinterland. When the city started moving, in Persian times, to its present location on the rocky peninsula, it ensured and strengthened ‘Akko’s status as a powerful maritime city.

Maritime factors are crucial to the understanding of ‘Akko throughout its history. Its natural semi-protected bay and peninsula are unique along the coastline of the Land of Israel and are comparable only to those of Tyre, Sidon and other major harbors of northern Phoenicia and the Levant. Therefore, Josephus Flavius emphasizes Akko’s favorable geographical position, adding that the particularities of the coast and the sand near the Belus River (modern *Na‘aman*) made it suitable for the discovery and production of glass (*War of the Jews* 2.188–191; cf. Pliny, *Natural History* IX.138–139; Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.27).

‘Akko was a prosperous international port from its earliest days and more particularly during the Greco-Roman period. The city later returned to periods of glory under the Crusaders and the Ottomans, proving its persistent cultural role in the history of northern Israel and the Galilee. The history of ‘Akko is marked by repeated phases of conquests and external influences which, when evaluated retrospectively, add to its image as a cosmopolitan city situated on the borders and crossroads of nations and cultures. These phenomena were to become particularly prominent during Greco-Roman times.

The Heritage of Wars

‘Akko was a major actor in regional political events and military conflicts since the Early and Middle

Bronze Ages. Most of the evidence for this period comes from royal lists or written documents such as the Ugarit texts. Archaeological remains from that period are quite limited and consist only of scattered walls and fortifications, but lack direct evidence of significant urban structures.

During the second millennium BCE, 'Akko, as well as large parts of the territory of Canaan, lived in the shadow of Egypt, the main military power in the region. 'Akko is mentioned in several of the el-'Amarna letters (fourteenth century BCE), in the correspondence between the kings of Egypt and Tyre, which report acts of violence or revolt against the rulers. The letters point out names of cities situated on the maritime route that connected the ports of the Northern Levant to Egypt. The documents of Ugarit support our information about 'Akko as an active commercial harbor where ships unloaded cargoes of grain sent from Egypt to Phoenicia. The grain from Egypt could then be exchanged for wood and oil from Phoenicia and Syria. These maritime dispatches serve as an early indication of the important part played by Late Bronze ports of the Southern Levant as intermediary stations along the shipping trade-routes. As long as seafaring routes were used for regular shipments of grain in exchange for cargoes of wood or oil, harbors such as 'Akko fulfilled their commercial vocation. For long centuries, these harbors became the principal connecting link between the Southern and Northern Levant.

Archaeologists have had difficulties in proving the validity of information obtained from the written sources concerning the Egyptian relations with 'Akko. Egyptian rule ended in the brutal destruction of the city which is indicated best by the remains of the Late Bronze Age palace at 'Akko. The destruction of the gates of 'Akko by Ramses II in 1296 BCE is, for example, depicted in the battle reliefs of the king's temple in Karnak.

After the end of Egyptian domination and the arrival of new powers between the thirteenth and the twelfth centuries BCE, 'Akko must have changed its political orientation. This change coincided with several developments related in Biblical texts: its destiny would from now on be much more conditioned by the prevailing empires and powers to the north.

An interesting characteristic is the continuing ambivalent attitude of 'Akko to the larger maritime cities in Phoenicia which were considered to be threatening rivals. 'Akko could not dissociate itself

from the commercial and military influence of Tyre or Sidon, a fact well-described in the prophecies of Isaiah (23.1–18) and Ezekiel (27–28). However, it could gradually place itself as a stronghold and military base in the northern part of the Land of Israel. 'Akko's tendency to act independently and strengthen its autonomy generally resulted in its destruction during the royal campaigns of Assyria and Babylon from the eighth century BCE onward. Acquisition of institutional and economic autonomy became one of the principles of 'Akko's policy as a major maritime city constantly fighting for survival between rival empires.

The Assyrian period was marked by 'Akko's devastation and a reshaping of its affiliations to the leading military and political powers of the age. The city was probably captured and destroyed during the campaign of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE), and the annals emphasize that 'Akko was then a strong and fortified city under the hegemony of Sidon.

'Akko may have regained some autonomy and tried to revolt one more time against the weakening Assyrian rule in the first half of the seventh century BCE. However, in 643 BCE the city was re-conquered by King Ashurbanipal who proudly declared that the non-submissive inhabitants of 'Akko were to be hung on poles placed around their city; others were exiled to Assyria.

As previously had happened under Egyptian rule, 'Akko was punished for disobedience to the dominant military power of the age. The realistic political lesson thereby learned would be to form alliances with other greater cities and empires. Tyre, which persisted in its non-submissive policy, had to pay a much higher price several times in its history.

From written sources, relatively little is known about events in 'Akko during the Persian period (sixth to fourth centuries BCE), which marks a new transition in the identity of 'Akko. Retrospective accounts of Hellenistic and Roman writers point to a peaceful period and to the stabilization of 'Akko as one of the active commercial maritime cities in the Southern Levant (Isaeus, *On the Estate of Nicostratus* 7; Demosthenes, *Contra Calippos*. 20; Herondas, *Pornoboskos* 2.16–17). The growing city was officially chosen as a base of operation for the Persian troops against Egypt. Diodoros, a main historical source for the Persian and Hellenistic periods, tells us that the satrap Pharnabazus, the general of Artaxerxes II, gathered in 'Akko 22,000 men and many vessels for his campaign (Diodoros, *The*

Library of History 15.41.3). A force of this size would have required camps, harbor installations, supplies and logistics in the city.

This explains why Strabo the geographer emphasized the status of 'Akko as a Persian base of operations and defines it as a *megalopolis* (Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.25). He also mentions, in the same description, that the coast between 'Akko and Tyre was a site suitable for the glass industry. The identification of 'Akko-Ptolemais and its coastal environment with this prestigious and profitable industry added, since antiquity, to its image as a rich and strong city, blessed by natural resources.

Phoenician, or Canaanite, influences on 'Akko were of major importance in religion and cult. The penetration of foreign divinities indeed marked for long the pantheon of 'Akko and contributed to its pagan image in Jewish eyes. Coins and inscriptions from Hellenistic and Roman times show cults for Ba'al, Melqart, Ashtoret, Tanit and others—all leading Phoenician gods and goddesses. Phoenician influence was so deep that it would be associated with 'Akko and neighboring sites of the northern Land of Israel for several centuries. The 'pagan character' attributed to 'Akko and its region by later Jewish sources was a perception resulting from Canaanite, Hellenistic and Roman influences throughout its history.

'Akko-Ptolemais at Its Peak: Hellenistic and Roman Times

'Akko is known to have been a melting pot of different populations, religions and cultures, and has essentially remained so until today. The multi-cultural character of the city is typically reflected in its different names. The Semitic name *'kw* ('Akko) appears in the Bible in the list of cities seized by the tribe of Asher, in the territory from which the local populations were not driven away (Judges 1.31). The Greek name *Aké*, which sounds similar to the Biblical–Semitic name, relates to a significant foundation myth. It is told that Heracles, wounded by Hydra, was ordered by the oracle of Delphi to go east and search for medical plants growing on the banks of a river. He came to the Belus near 'Akko, where he found the right plant to cure his wounds. It is believed that Heracles consequently decided to found a city there and call it *Aké* ('cure'), in recognition of this event. The foundation myth naturally remained in the memory of historians of later generations and

appears on its coins. A personification of Belus, the 'miraculous' river, in the form of a bearded man, is shown with the inscription *Colonia Ptolemais* on coins from the Early Roman period. A river situated close to a city was often emphasized by ancient authors and travelers as a significant territorial component in the identity of renowned cities. In the Greek world, foundation stories always contributed to the fame and positive image of important *poleis*. Among other maritime cities of the Land of Israel, only Iope (Yafo; Jaffa) and Ascalon (Ashqelon) could boast of ancient foundation-myths related to legendary heroes, who also appear on their coins. *Ptolemais*, however, was the new name given to the city after 280 BCE by Ptolemy II Philadelphus, king of Egypt. Attribution of dynastic and personalized names to cities was widely practiced in Hellenistic times subsequent to Alexander the Great's conquests. His successors, the Diadochs, especially the Ptolemies and Seleucids, pursued the policy of colonization accompanied by the immortalization of the sovereign. The fact is that 'Akko was the only maritime *metropolis* of the Hellenistic Land of Israel to be officially renamed by a famous ruler, the one who rebuilt Alexandria and transformed it into a glorious cultural mega-capital. The new identity of the city was not only a title of a symbolic value; it confirmed 'Akko-Ptolemais as an outpost of Hellenistic culture and strengthened its cosmopolitan status.

Rare evidence about the economic and commercial system of the Ptolemaic regime in the country comes from the third-century BCE Zenon papyri. They are reports on corn supplied to Egypt and prepared in 'Akko-Ptolemais by Zenon, an official of the royal financial administration, during his visit to the country in 259 BCE (Westermann 1940: Papyri 59004,12; 59008,17; 59698,11). The papyri prove that the city and the harbor of 'Akko-Ptolemais continued to serve as a maritime station in the grain trade of the Egyptian rulers. Zenon's journey is an additional piece of the puzzle that helps uncover the economic and political affiliations of Ptolemais in Hellenistic times.

The relatively large number of sources from the Greco-Roman period—texts, coins, inscriptions and material evidence—show the circumstances in which 'Akko regained its position as a major maritime city (Beeri 2004).

Political, economic and cultural developments all contributed to 'Akko's growth and influence. As a city situated between Egypt and Syria, its sovereignty was

disputed by the rival dynasties of the Ptolemies and Seleucids, both of whom were interested in establishing their domination along the littorals of the Southern Levant. 'Akko struggled to ensure its survival, to define an identity vis-à-vis the Hellenistic rulers and to affiliate itself with those who promised autonomy and welfare, whether Ptolemies or Seleucids.

In 'Akko-Ptolemais an active mint existed until Roman times. The coins minted there provide a good mirror of the civic and economic status. They reveal the fundamental city titles of 'autonomous', 'holy' and 'inviolable', typical of a hellenized *polis* with adequate political and religious institutions. However, the titles appear only from 125 BCE, during the decline of Seleucid power, more than half a century before the Roman conquest of the country.

The hellenization of a *polis* such as 'Akko had an effect on modes of life of its population and consequently on Jewish attitudes toward paganism in Greek cities. For the Greek merchants, whose presence is attested in 'Akko since the fifth century BCE, any public institution such as *bouleuterion*, *gymnasion*, *agora* or *theatron* was normative wherever Greek trade and colonization flourished. Josephus Flavius mentions in fact the existence of a Roman gymnasium in 'Akko during Herod's time, together with those at Tripolis and Damascus (Josephus, *War* 1.422). Unfortunately, excavations in the Hellenistic areas of 'Akko have not revealed any public building that could be expected to be found in a city of the size and importance of 'Akko-Ptolemais. A theater, or any public building appropriate to a *polis*, would have confirmed the civil and cultural status of 'Akko as the main metropolis of the northern coast. The remains of a temple and pottery found at the Post Office site (see Chapter 11: No. 58) indicate the existence of a sanctuary and Greek cults practiced between the third and first centuries BCE (Applebaum 1986).

For the Jews, who had settled in 'Akko and its surroundings since Hellenistic times, 'hellenization' meant improved economic opportunities on the one hand, but presented a threat to their religion and civic status on the other. The different cultural affinities and identities of Greeks and Jews in the mixed cities, especially maritime cities such as 'Akko, became a crucial point in their history. Tensions led to a growing conflict between the opposing communities, which exploded during the Hasmonean period and even more so during the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66–70 CE.

As for 'Akko-Ptolemais during Maccabean times (mid-second century BCE), our approach may be biased since it is founded mainly on accounts reported from the Jewish point of view. Nevertheless, the historical evidence we have shows that the Maccabean princes became more and more hellenized in their personal conduct and political orientations. Jonathan, who was slain in 'Akko in 143 BCE, and his brother Simon, appear in the Book of Maccabees and in Josephus' writings both as military commanders and as leaders who had complex political relations with the Seleucid rulers of their time.

In between campaigns, celebrations and festive meetings of the Maccabees, one gathers information about 'Akko-Ptolemais as a fortified city and a base for troops and fleets; it may have also served as the seat of a *strategos tes paralias*, a commander in control of the entire littoral down to Gaza (2 Maccabees 13.24–26). Such an official post alludes to the role of 'Akko as the headquarters of the Seleucid kings and to the priority given to their direct control of the coast and the maritime cities.

'Akko-Ptolemais of Roman times, at least until the Jewish uprising of 66 CE, probably maintained its features of the Hellenistic age, albeit in larger dimensions. However, the historical record may be misleading: it is principally based on the works of Josephus Flavius, and, to a lesser extent, on Roman authors, coins or other material sources. The lack of significant archaeological finds from the Roman period, in both land and underwater excavations, leaves us again with doubts as to the historical picture drawn in written sources. Nevertheless, literary and archaeological sources from the first century BCE onward reflect a culmination in the activity and status of a maritime city comparable only to its heyday under the Crusaders, many centuries later.

A few examples display the features of 'Akko-Ptolemais as a major maritime city under Roman rule. Similarly to its early days, 'Akko-Ptolemais acquired under the Romans a dominant position as a military and political stronghold and as a major commercial port. The Roman formal policy of encouraging the autonomy of cities was practiced after the conquest by Pompey in 63 BCE, marking the beginning of the Roman era in the country. 'Akko benefited from its reinforced status of *civitas libera*, as known from its coins. The series from 'Akko's mint reflects prosperity and political association with Republican leaders of the

civil war and later with the emperors, who bestowed benefits on it. 'Akko-Ptolemais welcomed, among others, Julius Caesar, when he disembarked at the port in 48/47 BCE, minting a special series in honor of his visit. The lessons of non-recognition of conquering powers, as in the early days of Egyptian rule, had become well-assimilated. The tragic consequences of a repeated refusal to submit to foreign rule, and the total destruction of neighboring Tyre by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, were well-remembered in 'Akko.

Like Julius Caesar, Octavian-Augustus was received by Herod in Ptolemais in 30 BCE, sign of their personal relationship and proof of the pro-Roman attitude of the king of Judaea and his circles.

'Akko-Ptolemais became the northern headquarters of Roman legions in its full meaning: camps, gathered troops, paved Roman roads (*viae*) and supplies. Campaigns departed from the city to the Galilee, as well as in the direction of Jerusalem, along the coastal road. As a growing city, a military base and an active port, Ptolemais had by the first century CE most features of a capital and principal city on the coast of the Western Galilee. During that period, illustrious persons disembarked at the port and visited the city, and these include Paul, who, according to Acts, arrived

from Tyre on his third journey (Acts 21.7) and remained there for one day. The city grew in population and may have numbered, in times of intensive commercial and military activity, thousands of citizens. As a military base, regional market and active port, it attracted a heterogeneous population of traders, artisans and various public professions. However, information during Roman times refers mostly to the dramatic events of the Jewish revolt and less to daily life.

In summary, 'Akko-Ptolemais appears in Hellenistic and Roman times as a major maritime city whose international ties place it at the crossroads of political powers and economic interests. This intensive chapter of 'Akko's history was to return, under completely different circumstances, during the Crusader and Ottoman periods.

The relatively poor condition of the architectural remains and sparse finds of the Hellenistic–Roman periods, repeatedly destroyed or re-used, presented an obstacle, as well as a challenge, to the field archaeologists. The archaeological expeditions reflect successive empires, armies and cultures that conquered, dominated, destroyed and rebuilt 'Akko. The results reported in this book make 'Akko a rich historical and archaeological laboratory for the study and comprehension of the heritage of ancient cities.

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