

## **The Philistine Marketplace at Ashkelon: The Secrets of Bones, Seeds, Metal and Pottery and What They Tell Us of Ancient Trade**

Adapted from the article, "Buy Low, Sell High: The Marketplace at Ashkelon," by Daniel M. Master and Lawrence E. Stager  
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Ashkelon is now a beautiful seaside city in contemporary Israel, but it was once an ancient city whose name comes from the same root as *shekel*. This Philistine port city brought neighboring peoples together to buy and sell. If archaeologists were to design a place to examine the economy of the ancient world, they could hardly pick a better site than Ashkelon. At the end of the South Arabian overland spice routes, in the seventh century B.C.E. Ashkelon was a major city with the region's largest Mediterranean port. Since 1985, archaeologists of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon have carefully sifted through the remains of the ancient city in search of evidence of international trade.

In 701 B.C.E. when the Assyrians conquered Lachish, coastal Ashkelon extended for more than 150 acres, with 12,000 to 15,000 people within its boundaries. To Ashkelon's east lay Judah, now an Assyrian province since Sennacherib's incursion. To feed that number of people on the surrounding fertile land was impossible given the few rural settlements within farming range of Ashkelon. So Ashkelon became a commercial center, where trade, not agriculture, was the primary mode of sustenance.

Thirty years ago, archeologists uncovered this remarkable marketplace. They wanted to know if buying and selling was part of everyday life or just something the wealthy took part in. What kinds of goods were sold here and from where did they come? Usually when a shop goes out of business or a city is conquered, all the goods for sale are taken away; little is left for the archaeologist to reconstruct. But the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Ashkelon, in late 600 B.C.E. provided a unique archaeological opportunity. Since his soldiers burned the entire city, the wreckage was too large for even his armies to loot completely. Seventh-century Ashkelon became an ideal time capsule, and it preserved the ancient Near East's marketplace for archeologists to uncover.

### **Evidence of Trade**

Archeologists, historians, mathematicians and other scholars have been studying the artifacts, as well as Biblical texts, to understand what they told about trade in the region:

- The diversity of weights and scales excavated showed that there was a diversity of buyers and sellers at the market, not a specialized or wealthy few.
- Skinned sheep were sold piece by piece until all that remained were the heads, which were discarded in the streets. An archeologist studying these bones identified the portions of the carcass that remained after the butcher was finished selling the meat.
- Another study, showed that Nile perch and sea bass came in with the ships from the Mediterranean ports of Greece and Cyprus.
- Through an amazing piece of scholarship, two Israeli scientists were able to show where much of the marketplace grain came from. While grain may be the same all over, certain weeds grow only in specific geographic zones, and they were able to locate the origin of the weeds that had been unintentionally gathered with the grain. Some sacks of wheat were imported overland from Judah, and other sacks came by ship from the Sharon plain, near Tel Aviv.

- The Ashkelon marketplace also offered upscale products, such as beautiful East Greek pottery. To the ancients these were simply the best ceramic tableware that money could buy. The Greek pots were such a hit that they were found in coastal settlements from Spain to the Black Sea to Ashkelon. At Ashkelon, these Greek decorated vessels competed in the high-end market with bowls from the Island of Cyprus and ceramic items offered by the Phoenicians.
- Not every piece of pottery was a thing of beauty, however. The rough local cooking pot was a specialized vessel made just outside Ashkelon and brought to the city for distribution via the market. It competed with cooking pots from Phoenicia, Syria and even Greece. The kitchens of Ashkelon had access to special kitchenware from all over the eastern Mediterranean.

### **Networks of Trade**

In short, all the necessities and luxuries of life were discovered together in the Ashkelon marketplace, from the grain, meat and wine for daily subsistence to elegant Greek pottery; all were paid in silver weighed at the local scale.

Trade from Ashkelon inland radiated in many directions. At Ashkelon, the people living closer inland, like the Judeans came together with other people in the region in a year-round flurry of trade and exchange. The economy grew, not through conquest, but by bringing together more producers and more consumers.

Sometime after the Assyrian conquest of Judah in 701 B.C.E., Philistine Ashkelon invested heavily in wine production, and the Philistine city of Ekron turned to olive oil production. Just as we can show that grain and fish and fine pottery were coming in from Mediterranean cities, the discoveries at Ashkelon show us that wine and olive oil were going out.

The successful commercial seaport of Ashkelon could not compete with Babylonian armies from Mesopotamia sweeping through the Near East. In 604 B.C.E. they marched into the Ashkelon Market smashing all the pottery, killing its inhabitants and burning it to the ground. From the perspective of the modern historian, Nebuchadnezzar could hardly have picked a better place to demolish. By destroying the city, he sealed in its ruins. Greek, Cypriot and Phoenician pottery, together with local pottery of the southern Levant, were trapped in the rubble. Over years of excavation and study, archeologists learned the secrets of the bones, seeds, metal and pottery the people of the city produced and just what kind of life they enjoyed in the days before the end. They found that their economic life was a lot more modern than might have been expected of an ancient society and through the buying and selling of goods they created networks of trade and interdependence between the many diverse peoples living in the region.