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When mapping archaeological expeditions by foreign institutes in the Near East and Africa, their high rate in relation to the total or archaeological activities in the area is embarrassingly evident. Thus, one might argue for retaining “colonialism in the name of knowledge” which nowadays is commonly justified due to ISIS. This situation is opposite in Israel. Israel—a colonialist state in its own right (but by no means the only one in the Middle East)—runs, on the one hand, a high number of university-led local excavations along with salvage excavations and an intensive archaeological survey, and on the other hand, hosts only a handful of foreign archaeological projects.

The excavations by American teams at Ascalon are thence relatively unique in the Israeli landscape. Conducted between 1985 and 2016, the first two decades of the excavation were directed at the site’s Biblical period, but the last decade focused on the medieval time (p. 11). The later research questions revolved around “the urban core of the city,” which meant, for the excavators, finding the Roman cardo and detecting the development of the site around it. That cardo was not yet located (p. 702). The site, 60 ha in total, is divided into a grid of 84 blocks of 100 sq m and includes northern and southern tells and segments of fortifications around the whole domain. Very comfortably, the ‘grid’ or area number and general location are regularly noted along the report. Besides its impressive fortifications, many segments from the Fatimid-Crusader period, the importance of the site is in its additional Fatimid remains (residential neighborhoods, fortifications, an in situ inscription, and coins).

The book opens with a general description of the site and text-based history of the toponym. Next, it systematically presents excavated “grids” which yielded medieval finds. For each chapter/grid, Hoffman declares the goals the excavation had, then lists and illustrates its results. Since a strong emphasis is given to the archaeological context of finds at the report, all these contexts (walls, floors, installations, etc.) are bolded and make the reading, once more, very convenient. Still, no glossary or reasoning are provided to explain the various terms for stone-lined subterranean installations and the differences between them (i.e. silo, sump, well, pit, bin). It is also not clear which of those are considered in the survey of shallow wells which was published in Ashkelon I (Lass 2008). This section is followed by a thorough description of the site’s fortifications by Denys Pringle, based on ancient texts, early modern surveys, and surveys and excavations conducted by the author. Interestingly, the typology of the fortifications according to construction characteristics (resulting in three main types) is not as comprehensive as the radiocarbon dates (six periods) but does not contradict it.

Portable artefacts and organic remains are analyzed next, often discussing also their archaeological contexts. The chapters include examinations of Chinese pottery by Tasha Vorder-

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strasse, clay lamps and other ceramics by Hoffman, coins by Robert Kool, other metal objects by Hannah Buckingham, glass by Robyn Le Blanc, botanic remains by Kathleen Forste and John Marston, and zoological remains by Paula Hesse and Deirdre Fulton. A chapter dedicated to objects made of stone is absent despite their documentation in the report (e.g. a basin in figure 6.8, a rotary quern in figure 11.12).

Whereas find spots of coins indicate for Kool and Hoffman primary-position contexts (pp. 524, 704), authors of the last two chapters consider also later processes. Grid 57 is an area identified as a “mixed-use residential quarter” with abundant pits. Relying on the pits content, industries such as bone processing and metal smelting might have taken place at the vicinity (Hoffman, p. 70). Botanic remains that were found only at that location (e.g. date and Christ's thorn jujube), and in relatively high amount, were interpreted as possible fuel, hence in a secondary use (Forste and Marston, p. 660). Likewise, animal bones do not represent only meat and livestock, but also raw material. Therefore, their archaeological survival is not random (Hesse and Fulton, p. 671). These methods, approaching the finds’ complex lifecycle, are found less frequently in the discipline and are welcome.

A number of chapters introduce the history of Ascalon according to the written sources. While this is a common method in Islamic Archaeologies, it is time to question its relevance and actual role. Moreover, very little dating methods are presented in the report (other than the radiocarbon dates for the fortifications), whereas “historical” text-based events are presented as pillars for the archaeological-site chronology. For instance, Pringle assumes that the “Umayyad-Abbasid” walls were built by ʿAbd al-Malik, hence by the early 8th century, because similar fortification projects assigned to him are reported from elsewhere (p. 205). Another example is dating the changes made at the church (Grid 34/41) between the Crusader conquest in 1153 and the end of their rule in 1187 (p. 33). This precise date most probably derives from historically-known events and not from the stratigraphy. Hence, it must be presented as such, external to the archaeological data.

A last point to discuss is the length of the project—30 years. Kool advocates the continuity of the excavation for its potential to produce large numismatic data (p. 524), which it indeed fulfilled with over 3,000 coins. Nonetheless, an excavation can enjoy continuity and still produce final reports every few seasons, when most involved parties are around. An inspiring example for responsible publications comes from the excavations at Hippos-Sussita by the University of Haifa (http://hippos.haifa.ac.il/index.php/publications). To summarize, I believe that foreign projects are a desirable addition to any strong core of local research, in any country. They potentially introduce new research questions, methods, and social/political discourses. Hosting them, however, should be conditioned inter alia by quick publications.

References

Lass, E.H.E.