

ACRE: HISTORICAL, ARCHEOLOGICAL AND CERAMOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Historical background:

Acre (Hebrew, 'Akko; Arabic, 'Akka), a Mediterranean coastal city, was one of the principle harbors of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. Following its conquest in 1104 by Baldwin I with the aid of the Genoese fleet, Acre emerged as a leading eastern Frankish port in the twelfth century. The presence of representatives of the three leading maritime cities (Genoa, Pisa and Venice), who resided in quarters within the town, contributed greatly to the city's growing commercial importance. It was also part of the royal domain of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, the port of Acre provided the king with a major income. Acre surrendered to Salāh ad-Dīn a few days after the defeat of the Crusader army at the Horns of Hattin on July 4, 1187 and a few months later, the most of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was in Muslim hands.



Acre, view of the old city

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Consequently the Third Crusade was launched, and after numerous sea and land battles and an intermittent siege, the Franks finally recaptured Acre on July 12, 1191. The second Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem that was then established was much smaller than the first. It did not include Jerusalem and consequently, Acre became the capital city. For the next one hundred years, Acre was the seat of the Crusader government, as well as of the Patriarch of Jerusalem (for most of this period) and of

the heads of the military orders. These functions, in addition to the thriving commerce of its busy port, made Acre the most important and cosmopolitan city in the Frankish East, playing a pivotal role in the maritime trade with Europe, the Muslim states and the Byzantine Empire, as well as continuing to serve as a gateway for pilgrims to the Holy Land until the fall of the Latin Kingdom in 1291 CE. New quarters were established in the city at that time and in the midthirteenth century, King Louis IX of France, who came to the Levant on the Seventh Crusade, reinforced the existing walls. Acre was extensively documented in thirteenth century written sources that include descriptions of the city by historians and pilgrims, legal documents and maps.

The Excavations:

Archaeological excavations have been conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority since 1990, partly commissioned for the promotion of tourism, and partly as salvage excavations due to the growth and development of the modern town and the Old City. These archaeological excavations have revealed different parts of Crusader-period Acre. The two large scale excavations, those conducted at the Hospitaller compound, the headquarters of the knights St. John and at the 'Knights Hotel', a residential and commercial quarter as well as the numerous other smaller excavations underscore the centrality of Crusader Acre by illuminating its densely populated nature and the variety of its public and domestic buildings, shops, streets and material culture remains. Many types of local imported ceramics were unearthed in all the excavations and they reflect the types in use by a cross-section of the population of Acre during this period. The Old City of Acre received the status of a UNESCO World Heritage site (2001), further enhancing the importance of the archeological finds.

The excavations in the Hospitaller Compound were headed by Miriam Avissar and Eliezer Stern from 1993 to 1995, and from 1995 to the present by E. Stern. These excavations revealed a large part of the Hospitaller Compound. The main parts consist of a central courtyard with water installations (wells and pools), which is surrounded by vaults. On its east side is a broad staircase that leads from the courtyard to a second floor. To the north of the courtyard are six large barrel-vaulted halls connected to each other by vaulted openings in the side walls and two more halls were apparently added later on the west. To the west is a vaulted passage that leads to a gate. West of the passage is a massive tower, with a latrine in its first floor, with an impressive

underground sewage system. To the east of the courtyard is a large pillared hall, consisting of twenty four groin-vaulted connected bays. To the south is another large hall, smaller than the eastern one, it has groin-vaulted bays supported by three massive round piers. This was identified as the refectory of the Hospitaller compound. Other elements uncovered include a dungeon, an additional small hall, and a covered southern street and alley. The exterior walls of the buildings flanking this street still bear plaster from the Crusader period containing graffiti of ships, coats of arms and other interesting drawings. The excavations in this area yielded many interesting finds from the Crusader period that include pottery, glass, coins, architectural fragments, sculptures and various other small artifacts (Avisar and Stern 1994; 1998; Stern 1999; 2001; 2002; Stern and Syon, in preparation).



The Hospitaller Compound, the IAA Archaeological Excavations (1991-2000)

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Large excavations were carried out in the northeastern corner of the Old City in an area known as the Knights' Hotel in 1995 and again in 2007, which revealed a large undisturbed domestic quarter. This is because the remains of the city in this area had been covered by wind-blown sand, and had been sparsely occupied in the Ottoman period. Thus, the buildings from the Crusader period were quite well-preserved, including walls preserved to a height of two meters above the floors. The remains in this area were part of a residential quarter that was also used for trade and light industry. The architecture of the houses includes inner courtyards with wells,

staircases leading to second floors, and rows of shops. On the floors of the buildings, remains of a fierce conflagration, and in some cases arrow heads, attest to the capture of the city in 1291. In some of the houses several rooms have been identified as facing the street, used as stores and workshops for the tenants. Underneath the houses, very well organized water systems and cesspits for drainage have been found. It appears that a lot of attention had been given to the subject of water and sewerage in the city. Due to the violent and sudden destruction of this quarter, much archaeological material was found. The finds include architectural and sculptured fragments, a mold for a statue, molds for pilgrims' ampullae, jewelry, coins, glass, glazed ceramic tiles, and a great deal of restorable pottery. The excavation yielded a wealth of small finds clearly dated to the last period of Crusader Acre (Syon and Tatcher 1998; Syon 2010; Stern and Syon, in preparation).



The Knights' Hotel, a residential and commercial quarter

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The Ceramic finds:

The Crusader-period pottery assemblage found in the excavations at Acre is diverse, containing a variety of local and imported types dating to the period of Frankish rule (12th – 13th centuries). The local pottery includes two main groups. The first consists of simple, unglazed pottery that seems to have been produced in Acre itself, based on chemical and petrographic analyses. The majority of this group of vessels mainly belongs to the “Acre Bowl” type: they are open, hemispherical, and have a short ledge

rim and a flat base. Additional shapes in this group include plates, basins, and other closed forms. “Acre ware” in fact comprises most of the ceramic assemblage.



Local wares-Acre workshop

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The second group consists of various glazed and unglazed ware, characterized by a red fabric. These include cooking ware, glazed bowls decorated in various techniques, oil lamps, and closed vessels.



Local wares-Beirut workshop

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This group of pottery seems to have been produced in Beirut, where they are found in abundance, and as indicated by chemical and petrographic analysis (Waksman 2002; Stern and Waksman 2003; Waksman et al. 2008; Stern 2012). Minor pottery groups produced at other sites in northern Israel and southern Lebanon were found, as well. Although the pottery manufactured in Beirut and its vicinity was most likely brought to Acre in ships, it is considered local, since Beirut was part of the Crusader Kingdom during the period under discussion.

In addition to the local ware, ceramics imported from a wide range of regions throughout the Mediterranean were also found. These imported vessels, the majority of which are glazed bowls, account for some 30% of the entire pottery assemblage. Pottery was imported to Acre from Syria (Port St. Symeon Ware), Asia Minor, Cyprus (Paphos-Lemba ware), Greece (Fine Byzantine ware and Aegean Ware), northern Italy, southern Italy and Sicily (Proto-maiolica), southern France, Catalonia in Spain, and North Africa (Blue and Manganese ware), as well as from beyond the Mediterranean, including China (Celadon).



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The origin of the imported pottery types was determined by typological and analytical studies (Avisar and Stern 2005: 40–80; Stern and Waksman 2003; Stern 2012). The imported pottery represents a variety of shapes, but the most common forms were glazed bowls and plates (84.7% of all the imported ware); less common were cooking vessels (11.1%) and transport amphorae (4.2%).

The many pottery types uncovered, intended for storing, preparing, cooking, and serving food, reflect the ceramics in use by a cross-section of the population of Crusader Acre. The preservation of many of the ceramic vessels unearthed in these excavations was extraordinarily good; many vessels were whole or nearly whole. The large variety of ceramic types, combined with the high degree of preservation that facilitated the identification of the origin of the wares, is uncommon at other medieval Mediterranean port sites. Another outstanding feature of this assemblage was the wide range of ceramic ware imported from many regions throughout the Mediterranean, including artifacts from the western Mediterranean that were not previously identified in Israel.

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