

# Contract Archaeology Reports II

## Excavation in Marcus Street, Ramla

### Reports and Studies of the Recanati Institute for Maritime Studies Excavations



University of Haifa

Haifa 2007



Recanati Institute  
for Maritime Studies





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# **Contract Archaeology Reports II**

## **Excavation in Marcus Street, Ramla**

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פרסומי חפירות יישומיות II  
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# Ramla's Urban Plan as Reflected in Primary Arabic Sources

Hassan S. Khalilieh and Michal Artzy

Ramla, founded by the Umayyad caliph Sulayman Ibn Abd al-Malik (96-99 AH/715-717 CE), was the capital city of the Military District of Palestine (*Jund Filastin*). It was situated at the crossroads of three principal trade routes: the *via maris*, the route connecting the port of Jaffa with Jerusalem, and that which connected Fustat (old Cairo) to Damascus and beyond, transversing Nablus (Shechem) and Tiberias. The mission for establishing Ramla was given to a Christian official called al-Batriq Ibn al-Naka (Jawdat 1986: 30-31). The initial building of the city started during the life of the caliph al-Walid Ibn Abd Malik before Sulayman Ibn Abd al-Malik became a caliph. It was said that when the caliph al-Walid Ibn Abd Malik died on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 715 CE his brother Sulayman was in Ramla (Gil 1992: 104-105). The sands, *raml*, on which Ramla was built, gave the city its name.

According to the written sources, the location of Ramla was not accidental. Islamic tradition accounts that there had been found in its Qibla (direction to Mecca) three-hundred tombs of Prophets - including that the Nabi (Prophet) Salih in a cave under the Ramla's White Mosque – as well as four-hundred of Prophet Muhammad's companions (*Sahaba*) (Jawdat 1986: 208; al-Hanbali, 2: 69). The association of Ramla with the Christian Lydda (Ludd) should be considered as an impetus to its location as well.

Ramla played a cardinal role in the domestic and international commercial activities in early Islamic Palestine. Al-Muqaddasi wrote (Le Strange 1965: 306):

“If al-Ramla had only running water, the town would be, without compare, the finest in Islam; for it is a pleasant and a fine city, standing between Jerusalem and the frontier towns, between the Ghour (Valley) of the Jordan and the sea. ... It is the emporium for Egypt, and the excellent commercial station for two seas.”

## The Urban Planning of Ramla according to Written Texts

The mosque and the palace of the governor were usually the first buildings to be erected in newly established Islamic cities. From there emerged the center of the city with its governmental offices, commercial areas, schools, law courts, hospitals, lodging for travelers *etc.* This seems to be the case of Ramla.

**Palace of the Governor (*Dar al-Imara/Qasr*):** It was the first architectural monument built in Ramla, situated in the area adjacent to *Dar al-Sabbaghin* (House of the Dyers). Sulayman Ibn Abd al-Malik constructed a very large water cistern in its vicinity (al-Baladhuri, 1: 170). Ibn Khallikan reports that the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin demolished

the *Qasr* on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Ramadan, 587 AH/25<sup>th</sup> of September, 1191 CE, before its recaptured by the Crusaders (Ibn Khallikan, 7: 199).

**The White Mosque:** The construction of the White Mosque (*al-Jami' al-Abyad*) was initiated by Sulayman Ibn Abd al-Malik before he became a caliph in 96 AH/715 CE. However, its first complex wasn't completed until the reign of the succeeding caliph 'Umar Ibn Abd al-'Aziz (99-101 AH/717-720 CE), who reduced its original size planned by Sulayman Ibn Abd al-Malik, claiming that the "people of Ramla should be content with the size thereof to which I have diminished" (al-Baladhuri, 1: 170; Bachrach 1996: 35). The mosque's size and architectural design drew the attention of geographers, historians, and travelers who visited Ramla. Al-Muqaddasi wrote (al-Muqaddasi 1906: 165; Jawdat 1986: 206-207):

"The chief mosque of al-Ramla is in the market, and it is even more beautiful and graceful than that of Damascus. It is called *al-Abyad* the White Mosque. In all Islam there is found no finer *mihrab* (prayer niche) than the one here, and its pulpit is the most splendid to be seen after that of Jerusalem; also it possesses a beautiful minaret, built by the caliph Hisham Ibn Abd al-Malik. I have heard my uncle relate that when this caliph was about to build the minaret, it was reported to him that the Christians possessed columns of marble, at this time lying buried beneath the sand, which they had prepared for the Church of Bali'ah. Thereupon the caliph Hisham informed the Christians that either they must show him where these columns lay, or that he would demolish their church at Lydda, and employ its columns for the building of his mosque. So the Christians pointed out where they had buried their columns. They are very thick, and tall, and beautiful. The covered portion (or main building) of the mosque is flagged with marble, and the court with other stone, all carefully laid together. The gates of the main-building are made of cypress-wood and cedar, carved in the inner parts, and very beautiful in appearance."<sup>1</sup>

Nasir-i Khosraw (395-481 AH/1004-1088 CE), who visited Ramla in Ramadan, 438 AH/March, 1047 CE, adds further description on the architectural plan of the White Mosque, stating (Le Strange 1965: 306-307):

"In the middle of the Friday Mosque, also, is a large tank; and from it, when it is filled with water, anyone who wishes may take. The area of the mosque measures 200 paces by 300 paces. Over one of its porches is an inscription, stating that on Muharram 15, of the year 425 (December 10, 1033 CE), there was an earthquake of great violence, which threw down a large number of buildings."

The written sources presented by Muslim chroniclers and geographers show that the mosque's complex was constructed in three main stages. The first stage is dated to the period

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<sup>1</sup> The translation is derived from Le Strange 1965: 305.

of the Umayyads, when the enclosure was erected in its original form. The second stage took place during the reign of Salih ed-Din (Saladin) in 586 AH/1190 CE, when he ordered one of his outstanding architects, Ilyas Ibn Abd Allah, to supervise the construction of the right side of the mosque, the western enclosure wall and the central ablutions building (Marmardji 1987: 144). The third phase is attributed to the Mamluk sultan al-Zahir Baybars, who, in 666 AH/1267-1268 CE, made several architectural modifications which consisted of building a splendid dome, placing a new pulpit and prayer niche, constructing the famous minaret, the portico east of the minaret, two halls attached to the eastern wall outside the area of the mosque enclosure and adding a door to the mosque. In Sha'aban, 718 AH/October, 1318 CE, the sultan Muhammad al-Nasir Ibn Qalawun renovated the minaret which was damaged in the tremendous earthquake. The renewed mosque, that of Nasir Ibn Qalawun, was considered to be one of the marvels in the Muslim world (Jawdat 1986: 207-209). Its architectural design is similar to that of al-Mansuriyya minaret in Cairo, which indicates that the architect, Ibn al-Suyufi likely planned both minarets. The minaret consists of 125 steps, with small rooms serving as rest areas and/or study rooms for the *imams* and pupils (Khalilieh 1991: 66-67).

**Streets and Marketplaces:** The city's system of streets ran to the administrative and economic centers of Ramla. The Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasi described its streets as clean, bearing the names of the cities to which they led, such as *Darb Bir al-'Askar*, *Darb Ludd*, *Darb Misr* etc. (al-Muqaddasi 1906: 164).

The city had ten markets, four of which were situated in the center, adjacent to the White Mosque. The market of Wheat Sellers (*Suq al-Qammahin*) ran from the Jaffa Gate to the Great Mosque; it is described as a fine market with good quality of various goods, adjacent to that of the Onion Sellers (*Suq al-Bassalin*), which was considered as an wholesale market as well (al-Hanbali, 2: 68). From the Gate of Jerusalem ran the Legumes Sellers Market (*Suq al-Qattanin*), which bordered that of the Flax Sellers (*Suq al-Mashshatin*), which extended to that of the Spice Dealers Market (*Suq al-Attarin*) that stretched to the city's mosque (al-Himyari, 286; al-Hanbali, 2: 68). The market of the Lumbermen (*Suq al-Khashshabin*) extended from the Gate of Yazur to the Market of Butchers (*Suq al-Jazzarin*) adjoining that of the Water Carriers (*Suq al-Saqqain*), which extended to the city's mosque at the center of the town (al-Himyari, 286). Likewise, the Market of Lumbermen was linked to other markets, specifically the Market of Saddlers (*Suq al-Akkafin*), Market of Swords Sharpening and Polishing (*Suq al-Sayaqila*), which was also connected with the Saddlers' Market that extended to the city's mosque, which adjoined the Market of Linen (*Suq al-Bazz*). The markets emanate directly from the city's gates and suburbs to the main mosque at the center (Jawdat 1986: 213-214).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Primary Arabic sources mention that Ramla was surrounded by 4,000 peasant hamlets, a matter which reflects its economic importance in the domestic trade.

**Walls and Gates:** Once the administrative, residential, and economic areas were constructed, sturdy walls were built to surround Ramla, to protect it from hostile attacks and observe peace and security within it. The walls were constructed of stones and gypsum mortar of great height and thickness, with 12 iron gates. The gates bore the names of places to which they led: Gate of Jerusalem, Bila'ah, Lydda, Jaffa, Misr, Dajun, Ascalon, Yazur, Shechem, al-Zaytun, 'Annabah, and 'Askar (Le Strange 1965: 305; al-Himyari, 268; Jawdat 1986: 211-212). On Muharram 15, 425 AH/December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1033 CE, an earthquake destroyed a large number of buildings including the city wall of Ramla, as it did in other sites.<sup>3</sup>

**Reservoirs and Hydraulic Installations:** Primary written sources also describe the hydraulic system in Ramla which included water channels, pools and subterranean reservoirs as well as cisterns in use in private residential and public areas. Al-Muqaddasi described the water system in Ramla (Le Strange 1965: 305):

“The disadvantages, on the other hand, are that in winter the place is a slough of mud; while in summer it is a powder-box of sand, where no water flows, neither is anything green, nor is the soil humid, nor does snow ever fall. Fleas here abound. The wells are deep and salt, and the rainwater is hoarded in closed cisterns - hence the poor go thirsty, and strangers seek water in vain. In the baths a fee has to be paid before servants will turn the water-wheel.”

Nasir-i Kosraw wrote (Le Strange 1965: 306):

“The inhabitants get their water from the rainfall, and in each house is a tank for storing the same, in order that there may always be a supply. In the middle of the Friday Mosque, also, is a large tank.”

Yaqut al-Hamawi added (Le Strange 1965: 308):

“Sulayman (Ibn Abd al-Malik) laid out the plan of a new city, and turned a place into wells of sweet water; for, be it known, al-Ramla did not exist before the days of this Sulayman. And he gave leave to the people to build, and they built in the city; and Sulayman dug for them the water channel which went by the name of Barada. He dug also wells of sweet water ... the drinking water now (1225 CE) is from wells that are brackish. Those who are rich have a cistern, and lock it up. It may be noted that most towns that have cisterns possess good fruits and a fine climate (since there is no stagnant water).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On the 425 AH/1033 CE earthquake, consult: Mann 1970: 1: 156-158; Ibn Taghri Bardi 1933: 4:279; Abu al-Fida, 12: 32-33; al-Maqrizi, 2: 181; Jawdat 1986: 211; Gil 1992: 173-174; Willis 1928; Ambraseys 1962.

<sup>4</sup> For the text in Arabic, consult Yaqut al-Hamawi 1226: 3: 71.



A Kufic inscription was found in the so-called Bir al-'Aneziyya (St. Helena well), situated about a kilometer to the north-west of Ramla, on the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem. The inscription on the plaster of the vault, opposite the first landing of the staircases, dates the construction of this cistern to Dhu al-Hijja, 172 AH/May, 789 CE, *i.e.*, the reign of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (Creswell 1989: 284-285).

Projects relating to the storage and distribution of water were a higher priority to the Umayyads and early Abbasid caliphs. This fact is evidenced by al-Baladhuri, who wrote (Le Strange 1965: 304):

"Now, Bani Umayyah had spent much money on the wells of Ramla and the water-channels, after Sulyman's days, and when the Abbasids came to reign, they spent large sums thereon ..."

One should not be surprised to observe that water installations were often mentioned in early Arabic inscriptions from Ramla. These have been dealt with by Sharon 1997: 100-108; Sharon 1966: 77-84 and Bachrach 1996: 36.

In 1949, Jacob Kaplan conducted archeological excavations in Ramla, which concentrated on the architectural remains of the White Mosque and on the buildings around it. Three subterranean cisterns were found, constructed uniformly, with the use of pillars topped by arches that supported barrel-shaped vaults. The southern and western cisterns were supplied by an underground water duct fed by a spring (probably from the vicinity of Gezer); the eastern cistern received the run off rainwater collected from the mosaic floor near the north wall. Also found in the excavations were two inscriptions that mention repairs made to the mosque (Kaplan 1958; Kaplan, Electronic resource; Khalilieh 1991: 65-66; Gorzalczany 2005).

**Synagogues:** There are no primary Arabic sources referring to synagogues in Ramla. However, documents from the Cairo Geniza mention not less than four synagogues: of the Babylonians, of the Jerusalemites, of the Karaites (of the Prophet Samuel), and "in the middle" (*al-kanisa al-wusta*). The presence of different synagogues is a clear indication that there were at least three Jewish communities in Ramla during the middle of the eleventh century. Gil estimates the number of Jewish families settled in Ramla at 1,000, *i.e.*, about 5,000 souls, of whom 20% were Karaites. The Jewish population was greater than that of Jerusalem and other places in *Jund Filastin* probably due to the city's economic importance and geographical location (Gil 1992: 173-174; Khalilieh 1991: 34-35).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The documentary evidence on the synagogues of Ramla does not enable us to reconstruct the architectural plan of each synagogue and it is beyond the scope of this short essay.

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