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1943–2017

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AN ASTYNOMOS AT ASCALON¹

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A recent publication by Gitler and Finkielsztein presented an inscribed copper-alloy disc acquired by the Israel Museum (Gitler and Finkielsztein 2015, Fig. 1.). The disc — roughly the size of a coin and pierced in the center — is inscribed in Greek on both sides, and if their reading is correct, gives the name of a city official who bears the title of *astynomos*.

It reads:



Fig. 1. The inscribed *astynomos* disc (after Gitler and Finkielsztein 2015, Fig. 1)

Side A: ΑΣΚΑΛΩΝΙΤΩΝ ΔΗΜΩ

Ἀσκαλωνιτῶν δήμῳ

Side B: ΛΓΞΡ ΑΣΥ ΣΤΡΑΤΩΝ

ΛΓΞΡ ἀστυ(νομοῦντος) Στράτων(ος)

“For the people of Ascalon, Year 163 [when] Straton [was] Asty[nomos]” (Gitler and Finkielsztein 2015: 39–40).

The date reflects Seleucid calendrical conventions and translates to 150/149 BCE, a period after the city had received nominal “independence” from Antiochus IV. The latter event in 168/167 BCE had been marked by the minting of a city coin, declaring it an issue of Ἀσκαλωνιτῶν δήμου, “of the people of

Ascalon,”² a statement which implies autonomy but is more likely to reflect some amount of royal license rather than full political independence (Gitler and Finkielsztein 2015: 41; see also Tal 2011).

While the disc is the same size and shape as a coin, the inscription differs from numismatic patterns in several ways: in the inclusion of a proper name which is neither that of a city nor that of a royal personage, in the case expressed by δήμῳ (the genitive being more common on coins) as well as in the division of the text over two sides (Gitler and Finkielsztein 2015: 40).³ The inscription instead has closer parallels among inscribed Hellenistic weights, objects which regularly include both non-royal proper names and dates, and which also make specific reference to municipal offices. Gitler and Finkielsztein point in particular to a contemporary Sidonian weight which mirrors the arrangement seen in the Ascalon disc, and which reads:

ΛΓΞΡ ΔΗΜΟΥ ΕΠΑΓΟΡΑΝΟΜΟΥ [Tyche]
ΜΝΑΣΕΟΥ

Λγξρ δήμου Επ’ ἀγορανόμου [Tyche]
Μνασέ{α}ου

“Year 163 of the People [when] Mnaseas was Agoranomos” (Alpi 1997, Finkielsztein 2012: 140–141, Gitler and Finkielsztein 2015: 40).

The pattern offered by contemporary weights thus lends support to the reconstruction of a municipal office in the position after the date. Gitler and Finkielsztein’s reading of *astynomos* in this space centers on the interpretation of the character

following ΑΣ as ligature of the letters T and Y. It must be acknowledged that such a ligature is, to my knowledge, unique. However alternate readings of the disc (for example reading the letter as a sideways *kappa*, or as a ligature for ΑΣΥ[ΛΟΥ, evoking numismatic parallels) would similarly be *hapaxes* in the presence of a personal name.⁴ The reconstruction of *astynomos* instead offers a solution which appears to be both epigraphically viable and circumstantially appropriate. The function of such a disc is unclear, although its piercing suggests that it was intended to be worn at some stage during its use. Gitler and Finkielsztejn suggest it may have served as a token or seal of office (2015: 43).

The title *astynomos* is not a frequently occurring one in the East, as indeed the authors note. It is attested on Hellenistic stamps on Sinopean and Chersonesean amphorae and also in 4th and 2nd century inscriptions from the Ionian coast at Iasos and Pergamon respectively, but is not otherwise widespread.⁵ If their reading is correct, therefore, the disc published by Gitler and Finkielsztejn in fact offers the only known evidence for the office in the Hellenistic Levant. The presence of such an official at Ascalon is thus significant and warrants further exploration. What role would an *astynomos* play? And how might the existence of such an office be manifest in the archaeological record of the city?

Gitler and Finkielsztejn suggest that the *astynomos* was likely “responsible for the supervision of the same functions as the *agoranomoi* in the southern Levant” (2015: 42). While this is a view that has long been proffered for the Roman Levant (see for example Sperber 1977: 241; Foster 1970: 129–30), the Classical and Hellenistic evidence speaks against such a conflation. *Agoranomoí* — of which there are numerous attestations throughout the Hellenistic east — were economic officials, charged among other things with facilitating commercial transactions, the regulation of weight systems and enforcement of violations. Ascalon appears to have had its own *agoranomos* by the third quarter of the 2nd century, if an inscribed weight said to have originated at the site (published in Decloedt 1914: 552) was properly attributed.⁶ *Agoranomoí* are also attested from the same period at Gaza (Lifshitz 1976: 173–174, no. 11)

and nearby Maresha (Kushnir-Stein 1997: 89–90; Finkielsztejn 1998, 2010).

The *astynomos* in the 5th and 4th centuries was not, however, an official in charge of weights, commerce or trade. Classical sources are clear on this point: the *astynomoi* were officials charged with overseeing city planning and construction, and in particular ensuring that there was no encroachment on streets or other public lands. The word itself occurs as early as the 5th century (in Aeschylus), and the office is described in several Classical sources. Plato, in his *Laws* (dated to the mid-4th century) explains that in his ideally conceived city the *astynomos* would be in charge of the roads, the buildings and the water supplies — including cisterns:

After the *agronomoi* (land stewards) the *astynomoi* shall follow ... imitating them in taking care both of the roads throughout the city and of the thoroughfares that extend from the countryside into the city, and taking care of its buildings, in order that all are in keeping with the laws, and in addition (they shall oversee) the waters... so that they are carried pure and in plenty into the wells, and may both benefit the city and make it beautiful at the same time.⁷

(Plato *Laws* 763c-d, my translation)

The word “buildings” (οικοδομία) is somewhat problematic as it can be used either as a general term for architecture — buildings or houses — or specifically to mean “edifice,” which would imply that the *astynomos* would only take charge of the sides of the buildings which faced the street. Aristotle, in speaking of a real city (Athens) adds both color and clarification to the role, and explains that the *astynomos* is in charge not only of roads and adjacent constructions but indeed all activities that occur in public streets, including entertainment:

“Ten *astynomoi* ... oversee the flute players and the harpists and lyre-players in order that they aren’t hired for more than two drachma ... and they take care that none of the dung-gatherers throw out dung within 1.25 stades of the (city) wall, and prevent building in the roads and the construction of balconies hanging over the roads, (the building of) raised pipes that

pour out into the road, and windows that open out onto the road, and they remove (the bodies of) those who die in the roads, since they have public servants (to do this).”⁸

In addition to the maintenance of public property, as the arbiter of boundaries between public and private the *astynomos* could also play a legal role wherever ownership of property within a city came into dispute. This function is specified by Aristotle (*Pol.* 1321b: 13–15) and illustrated in the first oration of Isaeus dating to the 4th century BCE. Isaeus describes a lawsuit brought by one Kleonymos, who had deposited his will — which included a bequest of property within city limits — with the *astynomos*, who was later called upon to confirm its contents.⁹ An *agoranomos* could also be called upon to witness contractual disputes, although he was typically engaged for actions brought within the sphere of commercial exchange, pricing and taxation. For the Classical period, Foster summarizes the dichotomy thus: “the *astynomos* was responsible for the maintenance of public buildings and streets outside the agora; the *agoranomos* was responsible for those inside” (Foster 1970:129).

It may be that a Hellenistic *astynomos*, or indeed *astynomoi* who served in cities outside of mainland Greece, could not be said to oversee precisely the same range of activities as described by Plato or Aristotle. Certainly the appearance of *astynomoi* on amphora stamps from the Black Sea, where like the Rhodian eponyms they appear together with the names of fabricants, is a Hellenistic innovation. Yet the names of *astynomoi* on stamps or even weights in this region may have served merely as chronological markers in the same manner as the Rhodian priests, rather than indicating that they had any specific economic role to play. Instead the greater weight of the Hellenistic evidence leans towards continuity with the Classical function of the office.

Third century BCE inscriptions from Athens and Delos demonstrate that *astynomoi* remained responsible for the maintenance of public buildings and property, including any moveable wealth. IG 2² 659 from Athens shows that the officials were charged not only with re-tarring the roof, but cleaning the altars and all of the pigeon droppings from

the temple of Aphrodite Pandemos.¹⁰ The Delos inscription names the *astynomoi* as the officials responsible for punishing those who steal temple property or slaves (the latter being also temple property).¹¹ Their continuing role as arbiters of property is confirmed in a 3rd century inscription from Tenos, which links *astynomoi* to the sale of houses and propertied dowries.¹² The clearest description of their primary function in the Hellenistic period, however, comes from an inscription from Pergamon dated to the Attalid period¹³ entitled the *Law of the Astynomoi*. The lengthy text details a range of functions of the city’s *astynomoi* and their subordinates. Their responsibilities included the solicitation of bids for construction and repair of properties, particularly for the repair of shared walls or fallen and abandoned structures, maintenance of fountains, watercourses, cisterns and roads, and collecting fines for infractions. The role of the *astynomos* in the Hellenistic city thus appears still to have been rooted in the oversight of public buildings and urban infrastructure, and of property at the intersection between public and private space. These were the arbiters of conflict and the architects of continuity.

Can we see evidence of such a role at Ascalon? I would argue yes. The evidence for this lies in the urban plan itself — not merely in the general continuity of the city’s overarching design but in the specific, regular and strict maintenance of the city’s insular structures, public avenues and water systems throughout the Hellenistic period. On three separate occasions, four neighborhoods on the site’s south tell (Grids 38, 50, 51 and 57) were leveled to their foundations and all rebuilt at the same time, while maintaining their original footprints: the first time in 280/270 BCE, again circa 150 BCE and yet again circa 125 BCE.¹⁴ While the interior spaces could be (and were) regularly rearranged in accordance with private needs, the exterior walls facing the street — the οἰκοδομία — were rebuilt along precisely the same lines, maintaining the integrity of the original street. At no point throughout the Hellenistic period are there indications of any construction or building additions that encroached upon the street, alleys or drains, not even groups of postholes that might be indicative of temporary structures. Rather, building activity

was deliberately confined within the footprints of the original insula, as demonstrated in Fig. 3, which showcases the example of a single neighborhood (Grid 51) over the course of nearly four centuries. Water systems too were maintained: drainage channels in all neighborhoods were regularly recut and the streets on either side of them repaved with cobbles. During the 2nd century BCE we even have evidence for the construction of a communal neighborhood well in Grid 51. This was not a private reservoir, but was instead built into the exterior wall of an insula and designed to be

accessible both from within the building as well as from the street outside. Taken together, all of these are clear indicators of centralized planning and maintenance of water systems, public edifices, and neighborhood design — actions in keeping with contemporary descriptions of the responsibilities of an *astynomos*. It was only in the 1st century CE, coincident with Roman control, that the city's alignment shifted to accommodate the construction of the Roman public buildings and likely the *cardo* and *decumanus* (Fig. 2), and the insular plan was no longer as rigidly protected.

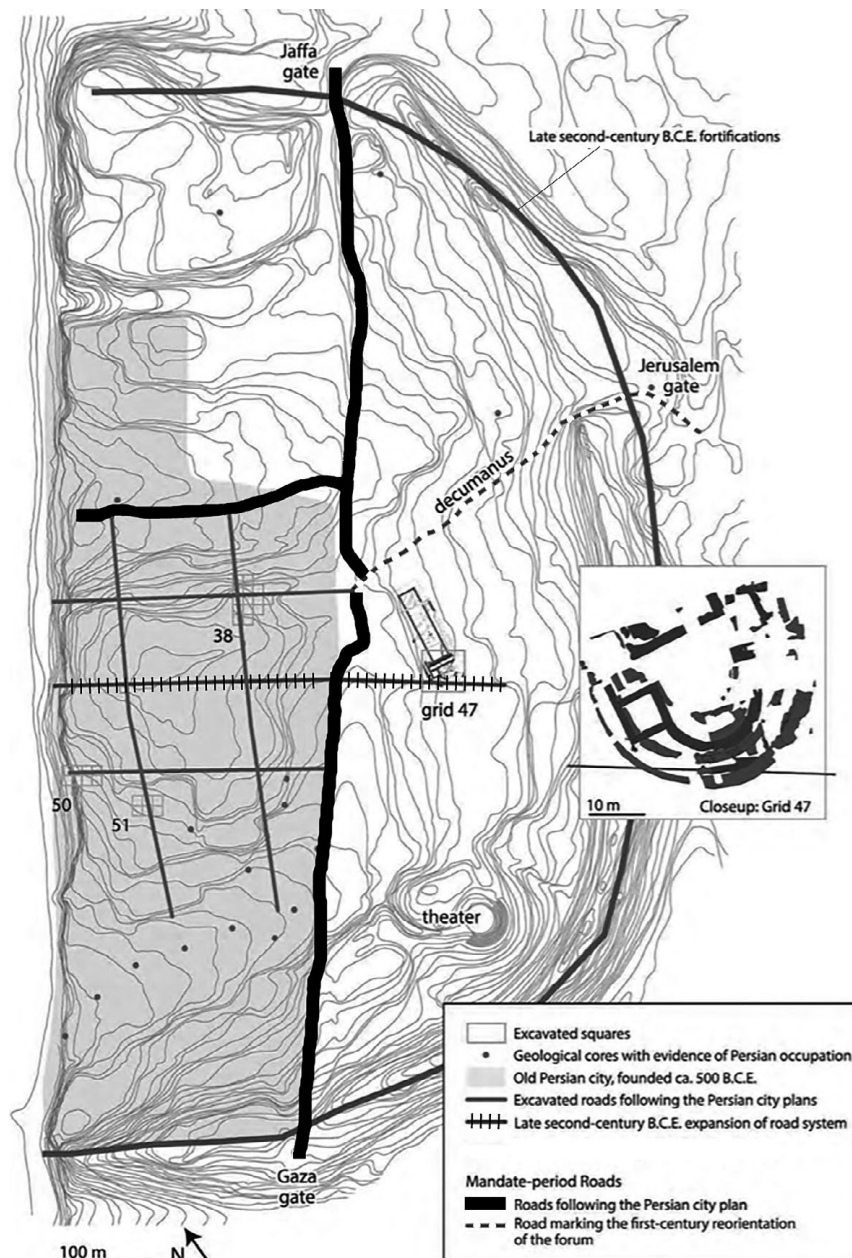


Fig. 2. The orthogonal city plan established by the Phoenicians and maintained throughout the Hellenistic period. The change in city plan is reflected in the construction of the later 1st century CE Roman bouleuterion in Grid 47, oriented to true north. (after Boehm, Master and LeBlanc 2016: Fig. 2)

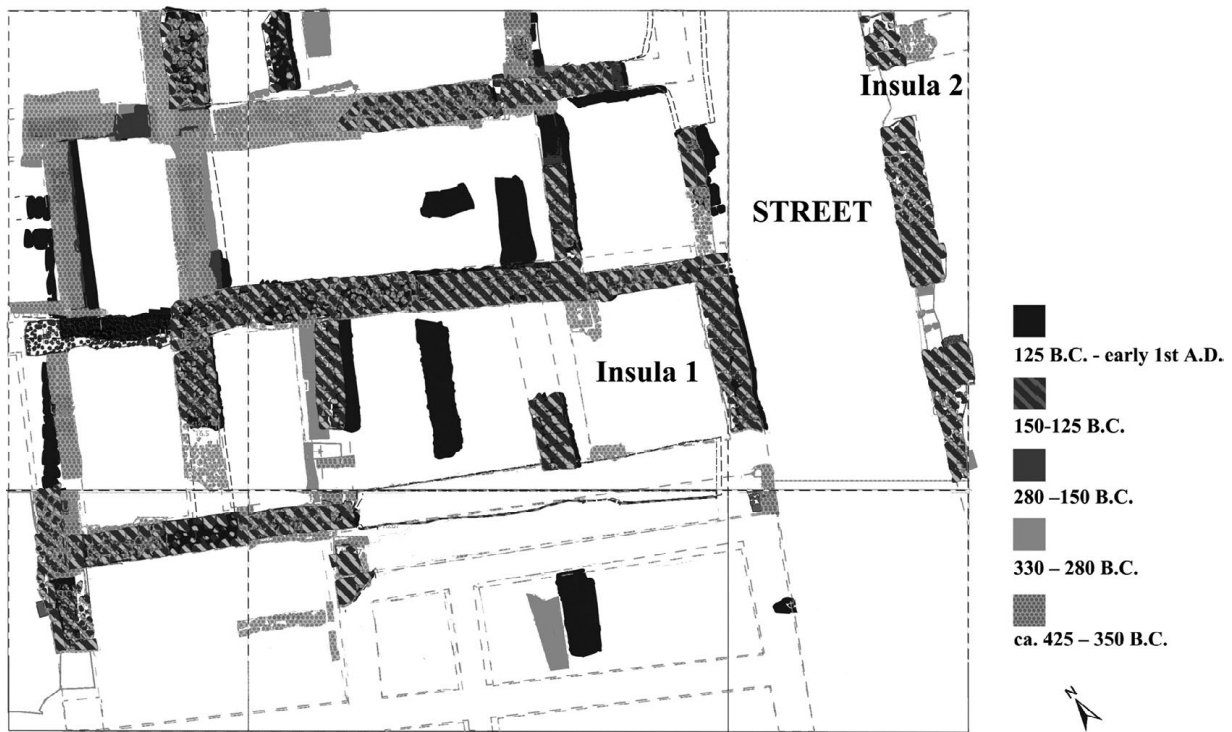


Fig. 3. The neighborhood plan of Grid 51 from the 5th century BCE to the end of the Hellenistic period, showing two insulae separated by a street. Robber trenches are marked with dotted lines and show original wall lines. (Image credit: Maria Ma)

While the evidence supports the existence of an *astynomos*-like office monitoring public spaces and utilities, the Hellenistic city must be considered in light of its Persian period past. Perhaps more significant in the present discussion is the fact that the archaeological record suggests that some such oversight must have been in place *before* the arrival of Alexander or the importation of any Greek civic structures. It was instead a phenomenon which began in the 5th century BCE when Ascalon became functionally a Phoenician city, having been refounded by Tyrians granted control of the city by the Persian king. The new city — constructed atop the remains of the abandoned Iron Age city left in smoldering ruin by Nebuchadnezzar — was distinctly Phoenician in character.¹⁵ This was the origin of Ascalon's north-south, largely orthogonal plan which ran oblique to the earlier Iron Age alignment, and its first division into neighborhoods of insulae, with north-south thoroughfares and east-west alleys. This city plan, along with the insulae themselves, were similar in style, construction patterns, spatial syntax,

and size to contemporary insulae known from the Phoenician heartland (e.g. Beirut), and also to Phoenician-controlled Tel Dor to the north, as well as Punic cities in Tunisia and the Western Mediterranean.¹⁶ Each of these cities likewise boasted streets with constructed sidewalks and integrated drainage systems. Like contemporary Tel Dor, Ascalon was certainly culturally, if not ethnically Phoenician throughout its two centuries of Persian rule.¹⁷

As with the Hellenistic remains, excavations of Persian period levels in each of the four neighborhoods on the south tell have offered similar evidence for urban maintenance throughout the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. At three separate points during the 5th century, for example, we have evidence for the repair and rebuilding of street curbs and sidewalks after overflow events (in Grids 50 and 51). Drainage channels were regularly recut. During one such reconstruction in the 4th century the insulae in all three neighborhoods were even paved with identical mudbrick flooring, using standardized mudbrick tiles. These are but a few

of many possible examples of urban maintenance during the Persian period.¹⁸

Such continuity over centuries does not occur organically, but is a mark of civic oversight and likely legal frameworks by which intersections between public and private space could be negotiated. The archaeological record of Ascalon thus seems to point to the presence of a building and planning authority from the 5th to the end of the 1st century BCE, dedicated to the maintenance of the city's infrastructure and also to the preservation of the ordered original Phoenician city plan. For the Persian period, we cannot say whether such a role was filled by an individual or an elected council, nor indeed whether the city administration

conformed to structures known from Punic cities such as Carthage, but that such an office must have existed in some form prior to the arrival of Alexander is clear. At least at Ascalon, the appearance of the title *astynomos* in the 2nd century — assuming that Gitler and Finkielsztejn are correct — thus needn't mark any significant shift in the nature of the city's governance or the importation of new civic structures, but may merely reflect the adoption of a Greek title for an already long-established role, originating in the city's Phoenician past. It is perhaps fitting, then, that the *astynomos* of Hellenistic Ascalon should be called Strato, a name which likewise has ties to both cultures.¹⁹

Notes

- 1 Thanks are due for the generous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, and Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, without whose support this work would not have been possible. Thanks always and especially are likewise due to L. Stager, D. Master, Shelby White and the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon.
- 2 Also issued in another version with the Greek misspelled: Ἀσκαλωνιτῶν δήνου (*BMC Pal.*: 105, No. 7).
- 3 Chemical analysis of the disc has moreover demonstrated that the alloy was unlike that of coinage, instead containing significant quantities of lead (Yahalom-Mack, Gitler, Tirosh and Erel 2015).
- 4 ἈΣΥΛΟΥ would also be historically inappropriate as the city would not receive its status as “holy and inviolate” for almost 40 years.
- 5 Amphora stamps: Finkielsztejn 2011, Conovici 2005, Zolotarev 2005, *inter alia*. For Iasos see IASOS 3: 1–54 concerning the Mausolus conspiracy, as discussed in Carlsson (2010: 171). For Pergamon see below.
- 6 The weight is a lead square weighing 35.3 g., and reads: ΛΑΡ ΑΓΟΡΑΝΟ ΜΟΥΝΤΟΚΝΙΚΑΝΔΡΟΥ (“Year 191, Nikandros being agoranomos”), dating to 122/121 BCE. Whether the *agoranomos* described was an Ascalonian or not, certainly the Maresha and Gaza examples make clear that at least within 25 years after the Ascalon *astynomos* inscription the two were perceived as distinct offices.
- 7 Plato *Laws* VI. 763c-d: Ἐποιντο δ' ἄν ἀγρονόμοις γε ἀστυνόμοι... μιμούμενοι ἐκείνους τῶν τε ὁδῶν ἐπιμελούμενοι τῶν κατὰ τὸ ἄστυ καὶ τῶν ἐκ τῆς χώρας λεωφόρων εἰς τὴν πόλιν ἀεὶ τεταμένων καὶ τῶν οἰκοδομῶν, ἵνα κατὰ νόμους γίνωνται πᾶσαι, καὶ δὴ καὶ τῶν ὑδάτων... ὅπως εἰς τὰς κρήνας ἱκανὰ καὶ καθαρὰ πορευόμενα, κοσμητὴ ἅμα καὶ ὠφελὴ τὴν πόλιν.
- 8 Arist. *Const. Ath.* 50 (my translation): “Καὶ ἀστυνόμοι δέκα... τὰς τε αὐλητρίδας καὶ τὰς ψαλτρίδας καὶ τὰς κιθαριστρίδας οὗτοι σκοποῦσιν, ὅπως μὴ πλείονος ἢ δυεῖν δραχμαῖν μισθωθῇσονται... καὶ ὅπως τῶν κοπρολόγων μηδεὶς ἐντὸς ἑὶ σταδίων τοῦ τείχους καταβαλεῖ κόπρον ἐπιμελοῦνται. Καὶ τὰς ὁδοὺς κωλύουσι κατοικοδομεῖν, καὶ δρυφάκτους ὑπὲρ τῶν ὁδῶν ὑπερτείνειν, καὶ ὄχετους μετεώρους εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν ἔκρουν ἔχοντας ποιεῖν, καὶ τὰς θυρίδας εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν ἀνοίγειν. Καὶ τοὺς ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς ἀπογιγνομένους ἀναιροῦσιν, ἔχοντες δημοσίους ὑπηρέτας.” Note that there are some discrepancies in the manuscript tradition regarding the specific distance beyond the city walls suitable for dumping garbage, although these variations do not have an impact on our argument. We have here used the 1981 Loeb edition.
- 9 Isaeus 1:15, 1:18 and at several points throughout the speech. See also Arist. *Pol.* 1321b: 18–20. See also Cox 2007.
- 10 IG 2² 659: 20–25.
- 11 IG XI, 4: 1296.
- 12 IG 12.5 872.1. A similar role was attested for the *agoranomos* in Roman Egypt (see, for example *P. Oxy.* IV I 99, *P. Oxy.* 719:13–29) which could reflect continuity with earlier Ptolemaic practices. However the real estate contracts in which they were involved seem to have been for properties with established boundaries, and furthermore, the function of the *agoranomos* in these transactions seems not to have been as an arbiter between public and private property but instead as an agent for the collection of state sales tax (Manning 2014: 17–20; Muhs 2005:19–20, Jakab 2014).

- 13 *SEG XIII* 521. The inscription was re-engraved under Hadrian although the law itself is dated to the Attalid period (Hansen 1971: 191–8; Allen 1983: 170–6, *inter alia*).
- 14 These correspond to site-wide Strata VIIC, VIIB, VIIA.
- 15 A detailed discussion of the architecture and the Phoenician character of the Persian and Hellenistic period city appears in the forthcoming Hellenistic volume (Birney forthcoming) and also in preliminary excavation reports for Grid 51 (Birney 2010–2014), currently available online at <https://ashkelon.site.wesleyan.edu/ongoing-research-publication-projects/>. The Persian period architecture is currently under study by R. Boehm.
- 16 Beirut: Elayi 2010; Dor: Stern 1995; Nitschke, Martin and Shalev 2011; Shalev and Martin 2012; Kerkouane: Fantar 1987; Carthage: Tang 2005: 69–106. Several of these cities, including even featured private Phoenician-style baths (see Birney in press).
- 17 As indeed S.R. Martin observes regarding Tel Dor (2007: 51).
- 18 Preliminary information can be found in the season excavation reports (see above, n.15). The Persian period architecture is currently under study by R. Boehm.
- 19 Originally interpreted as a Greek rendering of the Semitic theophoric Astarte, many scholars now take it to be of Greek origin. The epicenter of this etymological discussion has been the attribution of Straton's Tower, originating with Schürer (1901: II.1, 84) and followed by many others; *contra* Stieglitz (1996: 596) *inter alia*. By the same token, is interesting to note that the *agoranomos* attributed to Ascalon in the later 2nd century BCE had a Greek name (Nikandros). For a discussion of the ethnicity of *agoranomoi* see Decloedt 1914: 552–3, Clarysse 1985 and Finkielsztein 2010.

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