

Community, Conflict & Archaeology in Old Akko (Acre), Israel

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The Old City of Akko, Israel was declared a World Heritage site because of its well preserved Ottoman and Islamic-era town, and underground ruins of a Crusader port. Today, the Old City remains a 'living' Arabic town within a larger Jewish community. Akko's Arab population is economically depressed and skeptical of official tourism developments, wary of whose heritage will be preserved. The situation is complicated by the recent discovery of a Hellenistic port underneath the existing marina. The conflict between community and archaeology in regions of religious conflict are old problems. Akko has experimented with new solutions, which this paper will evaluate.

Introduction

In 2001, the Old City of Akko, Israel was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. This designation was based on the Old City's Ottoman and Islamic-era town, and the partly subterranean ruins of a well-preserved port built during the Crusader era. The Old City lies within a larger, mostly Jewish community and remains a living Arabic town where tourist shops have not yet replaced vegetable markets and small fishing boats dominate the marina. Akko's Arab community is economically depressed and skeptical of efforts by officials to develop the port for tourism. Moreover, the city's cultural resource management plans, formulated by both local development companies and the government, have generated conflict with residents, who have resisted some efforts to have Akko's Crusader legacy promoted alongside its 18th-19th century Arabic-Ottoman heritage. The recent discovery of well-preserved Hellenistic port facilities extending underneath the town and its fishing marina and proposals to incorporate these features into the city's heritage tourism infrastructure has complicated the situation. The conflict between community and archaeology, and the danger of privileging the dominant histories in regions of ethnic and religious conflict, are old and widespread problems. Akko, however, has been experimenting with some new solutions, which this article seeks to evaluate.

Cultural Heritage: Past and Present Problems

Heritage management efforts in Akko began during the British Mandate (1920-1948). Much of the work conducted during this period had its roots in a series of surveys carried out under the Palestine Exploration Fund during the late 19th century.¹ These initial surveys were conducted to search for not only biblical evidence but also the concrete archaeological evidence for modern European (and by default, Christian) society.² Following the establishment of the Mandate, the British Mandate Antiquity Department recognized the Old City's historical value and named certain

parts of the town to be antiquities protected under the 1929 Antiquities ordinance, including the city walls, the Crusader citadel, and the remains of an ancient aqueduct leading out of the city towards Tel Kabri.³ Although the fastidious attention to detail in the records would suggest a comprehensive survey of the town, the managing of sites initiated by the British was primarily focused on the Crusader legacy, presumably for its direct European ties. The restoration of the Crusader-era complex of the Hospitaller religious order (a project which continues into the present day) began under the British and dominated their efforts during their tenure in Akko. Ottoman-era sites and their descriptions are present in the files and while there is some evidence of restoring Ottoman material, it was not to the extent of the Hospitaller complex restorations. Some structures, such as a sentry box on top of the Ottoman wall, were demolished instead.⁴

The biased manner in which the British conducted their work and the subsequent politicized archaeological agenda of the new Jewish state crucially formed the way heritage and archaeology is dealt with in Akko as well as the country at large.⁵ This is reflected in the current state of the town, and its complete focus on the Crusader legacy and Hospitaller Citadel, which has been run by the Old Acre Development Company (OADC) since the 1960s. The OADC is a government-run organization whose primary goal is to transform Akko into an international tourist destination. Additionally, the company is dedicated to Akko as a diverse tourist attraction that will bring in many different types of people. The OADC also recognizes that Akko and its buildings must be conserved and restored to ensure that the history remains intact. Finally, the company is dedicated to improving the economic welfare of the area.⁶ As part of this mission, they have created an interactive walking museum in the Hospitaller complex, which draws the majority of Akko's tourists. True to their mission statement, this comprehensive restoration plan is aimed at "striking a delicate balance between the needs of conservation and those of development, so as to both protect and display

heritage components while allowing visitors to experience the place and ensure proper visitor management.”⁷

The restoration of the Hospitaller Compound has made a significant impact on the tourism industry in Akko, and even the Crusader name ‘Acre’ as it was known in the 11th and 12th centuries is synonymous with its contemporary name. For the most part, it is one of the few stops made by today’s tourists while traveling through the town.⁸ A short walk from the Hospitaller Compound will take visitors to a bustling Arab souk, Turkish baths built by Al-Jezzar, the Ottoman ruler of Akko from 1775-1804, as well as the mosque of Al-Jezzar.⁹ A walk to the seawalls will not only provide breathtaking views of the sea but an operational port dependent on local fishing. All of these landmarks are equally part of the heritage of the living residents of Akko, and yet, they receive decidedly less attention than the Crusader fortress nearby. Additionally, the 18th and 19th century buildings of the town, which can be considered historical monuments in their own right, are decrepit and underdeveloped. Akko is recognizable in Israel as not only a richly historic town, but also as one of the country’s impoverished.¹⁰

While the Compound is the primary reason for Akko’s UNESCO status, the official statement does recognize the other key history that is present. “Acre (Akko) is a living witness to the existence of two now extinct cultures – those of the Crusaders in the Holy Land and of the Ottomans....”¹¹ A seemingly logical conclusion would be that Arabs such as those that reside in Akko would likely identify with an Islamic heritage rather than a Western European one. This common misconception is part of a larger trend in Israeli archaeology today. First, in Akko and in other parts of the country, the focus on Jewish history over the last sixty years has been at the cost of all other histories.¹² Second, archaeological practice in Israel has been so intertwined with the nation building that has occurred since the declaration of

statehood in 1948 that there is the assumption that Arabs could use the direct heritage evidence in the ground to assert themselves as rightful owners of the land.¹³ The actuality is the opposite; since archaeology is so closely associated with Jewish national pride, Arabs view it as just another political maneuver on the part of the Israeli government as well as the fanatical Jewish settlers of the occupied territories.¹⁴ This distrust is misidentified as a complete ‘lack of interest’ in heritage.¹⁵

Since their inception, the OADC has made some strides in incorporating local preservation into tourism development. As part of their dedication to economic well being in Akko the OADC includes in its objectives: “To enable high quality residential and living conditions for the population of Old Acre.”¹⁶ This includes plans to expand the marina to hold 300 ships, which would expand the fishing industry and promote economic development for the local residents.¹⁷ The OADC also has future plans to restore and commercialize the Khan al-Umdan, an 18th century inn, the efforts of which will be discussed in further detail below.¹⁸ There are also several areas of the Crusader citadel that are still being conserved and will be open to the public in the coming years. The proposed concepts are ambitious and include many positive ideas for the improvement of Akko.



Figure 1: Akko’s marina

The history of the city itself and all development efforts are set against the backdrop of a modern city, which is politically complex and has broader cultural concerns than heritage management. Just last year, for reasons not yet discovered the mayor of Akko, Shimon Lankry, was shot and wounded by a masked man in a drive-by shooting.¹⁹ In the news more recently was Ahmad Tibi, a well-known anti-Zionist politician in the Israeli Knesset and a native son of Akko. He loudly criticized the Israeli government for their treatment of the city, saying that Akko is suffering from Jewish rule.²⁰ There is also recorded skepticism that exists among the local Arab population. As Abdu Matta, an Akko tour guide, stated in reference to the restoration projects, “the local people [are] afraid, and they are suspicious. We as human beings are suspicious of any new, huge change in our lives.”²¹ Archaeology and the cultural heritage management are inseparable from politics and religion, and it could not be more apparent in the Old City, where the majority population is Arab, the government leaders trying to develop the town are Jewish, and the tourists are either Christian or Jewish.²²

In interviews with various Arab locals, filmmaker Patrick B. Stewart highlights the skepticism the population feels in his documentary *Its Better to Jump*. Many say that they are afraid of Akko being transformed by the government into an overrun tourist town with no population. Abu Yusef Fakieh, a local fisherman, was convinced that the improvement of the marina was part of this plan.²³ All of the interviewees felt that the government, by offering to buy their houses, was pushing them out and trying to transform Akko into a European-style village where only the rich could afford to own houses. Additionally, they believe that any local organization that would help locals to improve their houses would be immediately shut down because the government does not want them to stay.

Any effort by the government to develop Akko for more tourists is viewed by many of the

residents as a negative action. As previously mentioned, the sale of the Khan al-Umdan, the 18th century inn, was the focus of several peaceful protests that occurred last October. These demonstrations were successful and the hotel development plans were stalled.²⁴ The locals viewed the sale of this historic building as an attack on their national identity and on their identity as Arabs of the Old City.²⁵ Demographically, Jewish people relocating to Akko from Gaza after Israel disengaged from the Strip in 2006 has further troubled the situation in Akko.²⁶ Makram Khoury, a well-known Israeli-Arab actor, likened the development of Akko to a military invasion, except instead of tanks, the government is occupying the town with their housing plan and replacing the history with the culture of another people.²⁷

Future Considerations for Improved Cultural Heritage Management

As the residents have vocalized, it is not a lack of concern for heritage that the people in this town possess, it is more a distrust of the official efforts and a lack of resources to initiate their own heritage endeavors. Akko is taking steps to combat not only these problems, but also the fundamental problem of archaeology among Arabs in Israel. The first step would be to recognize that heritage is not necessarily divided along religious and ethnic lines, but rather is a universal phenomenon.²⁸ This concept of universal heritage is already being put into practice by the Akko International Conservation Center, located in heart of the Old City. The interviews in *Its Better to Jump* have shown that the Akko residents are beginning to recognize the need for local involvement in heritage preservation.²⁹ They not only see that Akko has a lot of potential if developed the right way, but there is a sense of connection to the city’s history, both Arab and non-Arab. The Conservation Center is a branch of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), which provides space for international students to come and practice conservation. The center’s director, Shelley-Ann Peleg, believes that Akko

is an ideal place for the study of the history of Akko as well as an opportunity to evaluate and plan for the true diversity of Akko's rich heritage. Peleg also identifies it as an *in vivo* environment for multidisciplinary scholars, architects and engineers.³⁰

The Conservation Center has strengthened its relationship with the local people by keeping a literal open-door policy and by the introduction of various community programs.³¹ These local programs include lectures on the history of Akko as well as workshops at the local schools. Peleg believes that by involving the local population in the preservation of all aspects of their city, the residents will have increased pride and investment in the heritage that belongs to them.³² Moreover, the Center hosts students from around the world for five-month increments to learn about conservation and documentation techniques by allowing them to participate in the restoration of various buildings around the city. The mission of the Conservation Center recognizes that urban preservation is a daunting undertaking that requires a blending of architecture, structural, and community concerns. The true challenge, however, stems from the need to integrate these components and relate them to each other.³³ Intangible heritage, or the recognition of the visible remains as well as the local heritage and identity that has developed alongside the physical structures has become an important part of the Conservation Center's mission.³⁴ By involving the residents in preservation of their homes and community, they have integrated this concept in the upkeep of the Ottoman buildings in Akko.³⁵

In addition to the work that is being done by the International Conservation Center, the recent discovery of an ancient Hellenistic harbor poses more possibilities for strengthening Akko's cultural heritage development. The discovery of this harbor was the result of restoration work that was being done on the Ottoman seawall by the OADC. The restoration efforts included the construction of a cofferdam

that temporarily separated the sea and the wall. During this restoration, the discovery of ancient remains prompted the OADC to involve the IAA and initiate an archaeological survey. In 2011, the IAA was joined by the University of Rhode Island (URI) to excavate and preserve the ancient harbor facilities of Akko. The Hellenistic slipway that has been revealed can be dated to approximately the second century B.C.E. and it is estimated that the slipway extends below the Ottoman walls. While this is the first significant evidence of the harbor, the existence of the Hellenistic city underneath the Crusader and Ottoman layer has been known for quite some time, as land excavations outside of the wall have revealed as much.³⁶ The slipway and jetty facilities most likely extend further out into the modern port harbor. The discovery of these facilities was the goal of URI's 2013 field season, along with research conducted on several recently discovered 18th and 19th century wrecks. Future exploration will reveal the full extent of the ancient harbor.

This discovery is extremely significant to the understanding of the Hellenistic world and represents the first concrete evidence for the important military harbor at Ptolemais-Ake (Hellenistic Akko). The discovery poses a number of possibilities, however for the purposes of this study, the incorporation of the emerging ruins of Akko's Hellenistic maritime past and their role in its future development as a



Figure 2: the 2013 IAA/URI field season

center for archaeological tourism will dominate all future discussions of heritage management. An OADC proposed development would involve a walkway that would start on the southern beaches and lead along the length of the sea wall. The Hellenistic sunken ship shed – slipway structure, if revealed in its entirety, should be a valuable inclusion of this proposed walkway. Ideally, this could be another type of interactive museum similar to the Crusader fortress, with signs highlighting the important historical events that have occurred in Akko's harbor. The walkway would include all historical periods of Akko's harbor, thus making it appealing to many people. Additional historical information could easily be incorporated into the walkway for example, the research being done on Napoleon's attempt to gain control of the Holy Land, which included a siege to Akko in 1799 C.E. The discovery of several 18th and 19th century wrecks in the harbor and off Hatamarim beach to the south that could contribute to the discussion of the Napoleonic siege of Akko.

The development of this walkway is not foreseeable in the immediate future due to

the unfinished archaeological work and lack of funding for such an expensive endeavor. Another, more cost-effective option would be to construct an interactive 'walking' museum atop the existing seawalls. From the seawalls, a visitor would be able to learn about the town's history by looking and reading about it while being able to see and hear the modern town below. This experience in a sense embodies what Akko residents believe it should be known for: a living town housed against the backdrop of hundreds of years of history. The true potential of Akko as a center for tourism is illustrated by a recent media observation that its attraction is its history, which is unencumbered by large developments or chain restaurants.³⁷ Future tourism development should highlight the multiplicity of Akko's historical heritage, not just the prominent Crusader legacy.

The idea of a walkway could lead to another proposal: an enhancement of the city's walking tours. This has the potential to help the OADC and Conservation Center engage the local population in their cultural heritage in a way that brings attention and economic benefit to non-Crusader sites. Currently, the OADC



Figure 3: Map of Akko with walking tour outlined.

website has a section dedicated to walking tours of Akko.³⁸ These tours, similar to a walking museum experience either on or next to the city's walls, would be a wonderful way to involve tourists in the history of the town and the living culture that remains. Currently, there are seven different tours, highlighting different themes in the town's history and seemingly offering an option for a wide variety of visitors. However most visitors to Akko are day-trippers who will by default choose the Crusader tour, as the statistics have shown.³⁹ The walking tours on the Company's website are also limited in their historical scope and do not have detailed descriptions. In some of the tours it is unclear how the sites that are mentioned fit into the historic time period of the tours.

The OADC's current "classic tour" (which includes the citadel, Templar tunnels, Okashi museum, Ramchal synagogue, the souk, and Turkish baths) could be revised into a different experience that can be recommended to Akko's day-trippers. This premiere walking tour would give visitors an intensive and balanced introduction to the Old City over the ages. The redirection of resources will emphasize a shared commitment to celebrating the town's diverse historical attractions. The tour would highlight important Arab sites of Akko such as the Al-Jezzar Mosque as well as a walk along the Ottoman built seawall. It would also include the Crusader Pisan port, and any future development in the Hellenistic history of the town.

Conclusion

The Old City of Akko has been important to many civilizations and cultures, and for almost a hundred years it has been given attention by several heritage management efforts. Most recently, the Old Acre Development Company has been the leader of the city's conservation projects, including the Crusader-era Hospitaller complex. The complex is almost solely responsible for Akko's tourism industry. However, Akko faces larger problems than

diversifying the tourism experience, including acute political and religious tension. The International Conservation Center has been pursuing alternative avenues in relating to the local population, and while their success has started out small, it is a great stride for a troubled town. Additionally, the discovery of an ancient Hellenistic port has brought new possibilities to light for the city. If Akko is to develop and prosper as an international tourist destination while maintaining its pride and identity as a living Arab town, the local authorities and inhabitants must find common ground and a balanced, inclusive appreciation of the town's cultural heritage. A different approach, such as interesting and diverse walking tours, along with the continued incorporation of the local community will revitalize the local economy and ensure Akko's diverse history and culture for future generations.

Endnote

- 1 Abu El-Haj 2001, 22.
- 2 Abu El-Haj 2001, 22, 25.
- 3 1929. British Mandate Files, Akko, Antiquities Ordinance no. 51.
- 4 British Mandate Files, Akko, File 5, n. 3006
- 5 For a critical discussion of archaeological practice in Israel and its history, see Abu El-Haj, 2001.
- 6 Mission statement of the Company available at: <http://www.akko.org.il/en/Acre-Tourism-Development-Strategy>
- 7 Fuhrmann-Naaman & Kislev, 2010, 41.
- 8 It is estimated that approximately 250,000 visitors visited the complex annually between 2006 & 2011, more than any other attraction in the city. (See Shoval, 2013, 3.)
- 9 Murphy-O'Connor, 2008, 180.
- 10 Shoval, 2013, 3.
- 11 (2001) UNESCO Description of the Old City of Acre.
- 12 Abu El-Haj 2001, 251.
- 13 Abu El-Haj 2001, 252.
- 14 Abu El-Haj 2001, 249.
- 15 For a discussion of this 'disinterest' among the Arab population see Abu El-Haj, N. 2001. "Archaeology and Its Aftermath" In *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*, 239-276. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 16 For descriptions of the development strategy see "Acre Tourism Development Strategy" at <http://www.akko.org.il/en/Acre-Tourism-Development-Strategy>.
- 17 OADC "Acre Tourism Development Strategy"
- 18 For a description of the Future plans see "Future Plans" at <http://www.akko.org.il/en/Future-plans>.
- 19 Haaretz, Mar. 22, 2013.
- 20 Aretz Sheva, Jan. 26, 2014.
- 21 Matta, A. in CNN interview (Mysteries of the Holy Land).
- 22 Shoval, 2013, 3.
- 23 Stewart, 2014.
- 24 Electronic Intifada, Jan. 30, 2014.
- 25 Stewart, 2014.
- 26 Stewart, 2014.
- 27 Stewart, 2014.
- 28 Abu El-Haj, 2001, 242.
- 29 Stewart, 2014.
- 30 Peleg, 2008, 2.
- 31 Peleg, 2008, 2.
- 32 Peleg, 2008, 6.
- 33 Khirfan 2010, 49.
- 34 See the description of intangible heritage given by UNESCO at http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=34325&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- 35 Peleg, 2008, 2.
- 36 See Smithline, H. 2013 "A Unique Hellenistic Pottery Assemblage From Akko." *Atiqot* 76:71-103.
- 37 Montmousard, Acre ('Akko) 50: 153-179.
- 38 For the walking tours, their descriptions, and maps, refer to the Old Acre Development Website at <http://www.akko.org.il/en/Old-Acre-Walking-Tours-in-Acre>
- 39 See Shoval, 2013, 3.

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