

Gaza

at the Crossroads of Civilizations



Courtesy of Hamdan Taha



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

located on the western Mediterranean seashore, 32 kilometers north of the Egyptian border, Gaza City is considered one of the most ancient towns in the world. Strategically placed on the Mediterranean coastal route *Via Maris*, ancient Gaza was a prosperous trade center and a stop on the caravan route between Egypt, Syria, and Arabia.

Gaza was mentioned in ancient Egyptian sources from the fifteenth century BC as Gazat, from the reign of Thutmosis III, and in the Amarna Letters from the fourteenth century BC. It was mentioned in the Taanack tablets as an Egyptian administrative center during a period of Egyptian domination in Canaan.

The earliest archeological remains in Gaza date to the Chalcolithic period. Traces of Chalcolithic culture was attested at Qattif in Wadi Ghaza. The economy of this period was based primarily on cultivation

and pastoralism. At the end of the fourth millennium large villages and major urban centers appeared in the historic core of Gaza, Tell el-Ajjul, and Tell es-Sakan. Remains from the Early Bronze Age (3300–3000 BC) were found on the site of Tell es-Sakan, built as an Egyptian fortress on the border area between Egypt and Canaan. The second urban period in the Middle Bronze Age was excavated at Tell el-Ajjul by Sir Flinders Petrie. In the Late Bronze Age the center of Gaza moved to a tell below the present-day city's historical center.

The strong cultural ties between Egypt and the Canaanite city of Gaza are

brought down the Philistine temple.

Gaza maintained its role as a Mediterranean city and gateway to the sea. Anthedon Harbor in Balkhiyeh is the first known seaport in Gaza, mentioned in Islamic sources as Tida. The site was inhabited from 800 BC to 1100 AD, and was occupied during the Neo-Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid periods. One kilometer south of the seaport of Anthedon lies the ancient harbor of Maiumas, which was also populated during the Roman period.

In 734 BC, the Assyrian king Tiglath-



Blue vase from the Mamluk era showing the resilience of the pottery industry and reflecting the resilience of the people.

reflected in the wealth of Egyptian material recovered in Gaza sites. These include scarabs, alabaster, pottery, and anthropoid coffins.

Gaza was a major Philistine city in the Early Iron Age. The Philistines, despite their distinctive material culture – especially their decorated pottery – assimilated the Canaanite culture and adopted the Canaanite god of fertility, Dagon. Gaza City is mentioned several times in the Bible, especially as the place where, according to tradition, Samson

Pileser III captured Gaza, and the city remained under Assyrian control until the middle of the seventh century BC. During the sixth century, Gaza became an important royal fortress under the Babylonians. It is the first city in Palestine that minted its own coins and established its own monetary system.

During the Persian period, Gaza along with Ashdod and Askalon invented its coinage system, which was known as Philisto-Arabian. It emerged in the second half of the fifth century and continued to

Palestinian Dishes



Sumaghiyyeh

Sumaghiyyeh (السمافية) is a Palestinian dish that is native to the Gaza area. It receives its name from the spice sumac (Aramaic for “red”). The sumac is first soaked in water and then mixed with tahini (sesame seed paste), water, and flour as a thickener. The mixture is then added to sautéed chopped Swiss chard, cooked beef cut into small cubes, cooked chickpeas (garbanzo beans), and seasoned with dill seeds, chili peppers, chopped onion and garlic fried in olive oil, beef broth, seasoning, salt, and black pepper. It is served with pita bread.

be minted in the fourth century BC. The coins show the name of the minting authority, that is, Gaza 'zh, and Gaza in abbreviated form, 'z, or m, denoting Marnas, Gaza's prime deity. This coinage represents the formative stage in the development of the early monetary system of Palestine.

The city of Gaza flourished during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The ancient Greek writer Herodotus referred to it as Kadytis. In 332 BC, the city was captured by Alexander the Great after a long siege. During

the Roman Period, Gaza became a major urban center, with temples dedicated to Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, and the major local deity Marnas. The city was expanded beyond the ancient settlement, and the ancient port of Maiumas was established.

During the Byzantine period, the name of the city was changed to Constantia, and a large church was built on the site of the temple of Marnas in the fifth century AD. The city was depicted on the Madaba mosaic map from the sixth century as a large city with colonnaded streets and a large basilica in the center. It was shown also on the eighth-century mosaic floor of the church of St. Stephen at Umm Er-Rasas.

Christianity flourished in Gaza as indicated by various settlements in this period.

In 396 Porphyrius was appointed bishop of Gaza. At his request the Empress Eudoxia ordered the closure of Roman temples in 402 AD. Porphyrius erected a church on the ruins of the temple to Marnas and was buried there in 420 AD.

Eight kilometers south of Gaza is the site of Tell Umm Amer, identified with Tabatha. It appears on the Madaba map, dating from the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. The site contains the ruins of the monastery



Column crown that demonstrates how Muslim artists incorporated the arts of former civilizations into their own style in ornaments and interior and exterior decorations of buildings.



Photo by George Azar.

of Saint Hilarion (born in 291 AD), which consist of two churches, a burial site, a baptism hall, a cemetery, an audience hall, and dining rooms, as well as water cisterns, an oven, drainage channels, and a bath. The floors were paved with limestone, marble tiles, and colored mosaics decorated with plant and animal patterns. The floors contain Greek inscriptions. Tabatha was the burial place of St. Hilarion, who is considered to be the founder of monastic life in Palestine

In 636, Gaza came under Islamic rule. It became famous as the burial place of Hashim, the grandfather of Prophet Mohammad, and as the birthplace of Al-Shafi, the founder of a mainstream school of Sunni Islam. The city was dotted with mosques and Islamic schools. The Great Mosque, known as Al-Umari Mosque, with its beautiful minaret, features as an outstanding monument in the old city.

Many different Muslim dynasties ruled Gaza over the next thirteen centuries: Umayyads, Abbasids, Tulunids, the Ikhshidids, the Fatimids, the Ayyubids, the Mamluks, and the Ottomans; each dynasty left its cultural imprint on the city.

During the Crusader period, Gaza was part of the Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem, under King Baldwin III. The church of John the Baptist was built on the site of the Eudoxiana. In 1187, the city was captured by Saladin and became part of the Ayyubid state.

Gaza was a regional capital during the Mamluk period. Sultan Baybars (1260–1277) halted the Mongols and defeated them in the battle of Ain Jalut in 1260. The Mamluks launched great building works in Palestine. They rebuilt many cities and established public institutions, including a chain of trade and postal stations along the coastal route, which was called Darb



Coins minted in Gaza demonstrate a degree of sovereignty as well as the skill of Gaza artisans.



Photo by George Azar.

as-Sultan, linking Cairo and Damascus. Today, the ruins of a caravanserai (*khan*) still stand at the center of the city of Khan Younis. The Mamluk architectural heritage in Gaza includes mosques, schools, hospitals, caravanserais, and public baths, including the As-Samara Bath, which still stands today.

In 1516 the city of Gaza fell to the

Ottoman Empire and became the capital of the province of Palestine. It flourished during this period as a main trade center and a station on the main trade and military route between Egypt, Palestine, and Arabia.

The Qasr al-Pasha was established to serve as the residence of the *walis* (governors). It is believed that Napoleon

Bonaparte, during his military campaign in Egypt and Palestine in 1798–1799, resided in this castle, and it is sometimes referred to as Napoleon's castle. The structure incorporates materials from nearby ruins, and stones can be found in the walls which bear the lion insignia of thirteenth-century Mamluk Sultan Baybars.

Gaza was under British rule from 1918 to 1948, and under Egyptian rule between 1948 and 1967, when it fell under Israeli occupation in 1967. Following the transfer of authority to the Palestinians in 1995, Gaza was again under the control of its people.

collector, Mr. J. Khoudary, who opened a private museum (Al-Mathaf) in Gaza. Archeological heritage of Gaza has been exhibited internationally during the last two decades in Paris (2000), Geneva (2007), Switzerland (2009), and Germany and Sweden (2011). These exhibitions managed to show the other face of Gaza.

Today, Gaza City is the economic and political center of the Gaza region, where citrus fruits and other crops are grown. The city is famous for its traditional handwoven carpets and its furniture and pottery. Famous also for its fresh seafood, Gaza has numerous



Al Omari Mosque, Gaza. Photo by Mohammed Alafraqi.

Palestinian Dresses

Gaza Dresses

Gaza is known for its wide array of embroidered dresses: *Zouneyet Gaza*, *Al-Gilegli*, *Jana wa Nar*, *Abu Hiz*, *Abu Rukbeh*, and the *Majdalawi*.

The dresses are hand-embroidered on thick dark-blue linen with deep purple and green stripes. Other distinctive features include narrow sleeves and a beautiful hijab motif, which is formed by two opposing triangles. The headdress is knitted with beads and cotton threads.



Photo courtesy of ©MahaSaca, Palestinian Heritage Center, Bethlehem, Palestine.

In 1879, a statue of Zeus was discovered in Gaza and sparked new interest in the history of the city. During the last century many more artifacts that tell the story of Gaza and its people have been recovered. A series of excavations was carried out in the last century in various sites, including Gaza, Tell el-Ajjul, Rafah, Tell er-Ruqeish, Blakhyia, Tell es-Sakan, and Tell Umm Amer in Nuseirat. The rich archeological heritage of Gaza is exhibited locally in some small site museums run by the government and also by a private

restaurants, public parks, and hotels along the Gaza beach.

Gaza has played a great role in history, and today it withstands the siege and the recent devastating political upheavals as it looks for a better future.

The article is inspired by The Other Face of Gaza: The Gaza Continuum by Rania Filfil and Barbara Louton first published in the September 2008 issue of This Week in Palestine that was dedicated to Gaza.