

## Christian Topography of Byzantine Gaza

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### Abstract

*The important geo-strategic location of Gaza on the road between Asia and Africa made it acquire an extraordinary military, economic and spiritual importance throughout history. It was settled since the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC through the following historic periods. Gaza was depicted on the Byzantine mosaic map of Madaba as the second largest cities after Jerusalem. Saint Hilarion, who born in the village of Thabatha, Gaza, in 291 introduced monasticism into Palestine and built the first monastery approximately seven kilometers south of the city of Gaza. Constantine the Great rewarded the inhabitants of Maioumas, the seaport of Gaza, for their early adoption of Christianity by elevating it to the status of a “polis”. By the edict of the Byzantine emperor Arcadius paganism was eliminated in Gaza and a church was built in 407. Soon Gaza became important in the early Christian world attracting people to settle at a series of villages mentioned in the literature, depicted on the Madaba map and excavated within the present borders of the Gaza Strip.*

**Keywords:** Gaza, Byzantine Gaza, Gaza archaeology, Gaza history, Gaza mosaics, Gaza Christianity, Saint Hilarion, Saint Porphyry, monasticism, churches,

### Introduction

The geo-strategic location of Gaza between Asia/Canaan in the north and Africa/Egypt in the south attracted people to settle and establish sediment communities since the Neolithic period in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC and then in the beginning of the Bronze Age in the late 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Dwellings of a walled city founded by the Pharaoh Narmer, the founder of the first Ancient Egyptian Dynasty in around 3200 BC, has partially been excavated at *Tell es-Sakan*, in the southern vicinity of the city of Gaza (Miroschedji and Sadeq: 2000). Gaza continued to play an important role in later history, including in the Iron Age, the Assyrian, Greek and Hellenistic periods (or simply, continued to play a role through the Assyrian, Greek, and Hellenistic periods). In around 64 AD, the great Roman general Pompey set off on a campaign to conquer Asia Minor and eventually arrived in Palestine. Gaza continued to play its geo-strategic role maintaining its prosperity in the most southern *Palaestina Prima* province of the Roman Empire adjacent to Egypt. In this new historic era the city of Gaza became a Roman military colony ruled directly by the emperor of Rome who appointed a legate to take charge of the city.

The independence of Gaza in the Roman period is proven by its own calendar (Clermont-Ganneau: 1899) and the large number of Hadrian coins (129-130 AD) refers to Hadrian residence in the city. In the second and third centuries, Gaza became a prosperous center of Greek commerce and culture and by the end of the third century AD Christianity started to expand further within Gaza and its surrounding regions. In 291 St. Hilarion, the first hermit of Palestine was born at *Thabatha*, five miles south of the city of Gaza (Jerome: 390). As a sign of its independence as a Christian city, Gaza was represented by its Bishop, Asclepas, in the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and Constantine the Great rewarded the inhabitants of Maioumas, the seaport of Gaza, for their adoption of Christianity by giving their town the name “Constantia” and elevating it to the status of a “polis”, an enfranchised city-state under the Romans. In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD a bitter conflict developed in the city between pagans and Christians which occasionally required the intervention of imperial troops and the destruction of the city’s eight pagan temples in 401 AD. With the help of the Byzantine emperor Arcadius and his wife, Empress Eudoxia, a central large church was consecrated by Porphyry, the Bishop of Gaza, on Easter Day of 407 and named after Eudoxia (Sadeq: 2000; Diaconus: 1913). Soon after, in around 540 AD, Gaza became an important city in the early Christian world and served as a main station for pilgrimages between the holy sites in Palestine and the Sinai Peninsula.

Christianity became the overwhelming religion in the city of Gaza and many Christian villages were founded at locations throughout the present borders of the Gaza Strip. This is attested by a series of archaeological sites containing remains of churches, mosaic pavements, architecture and material culture dated to the Byzantine period. This paper endeavors to highlight the locations and urban characteristics of the major Christian centers of Gaza Strip during the Byzantine period based on archaeological evidence and contemporaneous texts.

### **Byzantine City of Gaza**

The entire Roman-Byzantine city of Gaza lies today beneath the mediaeval and modern Gaza on the artificial mound of the old city. Roman-Byzantine structures, complete pillars, marble capitals, Greek inscriptions, objects and inscribed marble panels have been unearthed during new constructions within the old city. As shown in the Madaba map of Jordan, the Byzantine walled city of Gaza was characterized by its high level of urbanism. The map depicts the city as the second largest city of Palestine after Jerusalem. Its chief temple of Marnas and the seven other public temples of Helios - the Sun, Aphrodite-Venus, Apollo, Persephone, Hecate, Hiereion, and Tychaeon) are not depicted in the map which attests the map's date into the Christian period and most likely during the reign of Justinian (527 - 565 AD) (Avi-Yonah: 1954).

Paganism in Gaza came to its end in the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The Greek ecclesiastic St. Porphyry who (died in 420 AD) obtained the edict of Emperor Arcadius authorizing the destruction of all the temples of Gaza and the construction of a church on the site of the temple of Marnas (Diaconus: 1913). It was named *Eudoxiana* after the Empress Eudoxia (died in 404 AD), the wife of Emperor Arcadius, who, according to the *Life of Porphyry*, sent from Constantinople a floor plan in the shape of a cross as well as funds for the building works and thirty two Carystian pillars "shining like emeralds" (Diaconus 1913: 84) for the construction under the direction of the architect Rufinus from Antioch. The church was consecrated by Bishop Porphyry on Easter Day, 14 April 407 AD (Diaconus 1913).

The Church does not exist anymore as it was likely destroyed either during the Sassanid invasion of Syria and Palestine in 614-618 AD under Khosroes II which resulted the destruction of almost all the Christian shrines in Palestine, or due to the strong earthquake that struck Gaza in 672 AD (Meyer: 1966, Amiram: 1996). The ruins uncovered by the author in trenches inside the grand al-'Umari mosque, the former Crusader Cathedral (Pringle: 1993), may belong to the Eudoxiana.



Gaza and the surrounding villages on Madaba map (Avi Yonah: 1960)

The Christian city of Gaza during the Byzantine period was characterized by its high level of urbanism. The Madaba map shows main colonnaded streets intersecting in the center of the city. Each is lined with *stoas* represented by white columns supporting red roofs. The streets apparently lead to the city gates. The streets are running north-south and east-west crossing the centre of the city. They could be compared in terms of location and direction with the streets plan of Gaza drawn up by George Gatt in 1887, when long parts of the walls of Gaza were still visible (Gatt: 1888). It is difficult to establish the location of the pagan temples in Gaza. The Madaba map does not depict pagan temples as it reflects Christian Gaza. Nevertheless, images taken prior to its restoration in 1965 show a square structure in the center of the city. This is most likely the temple of Aphrodite, which stood, according to the *Life of Porphyry* (Diaconus: 1913) in the middle of the city.

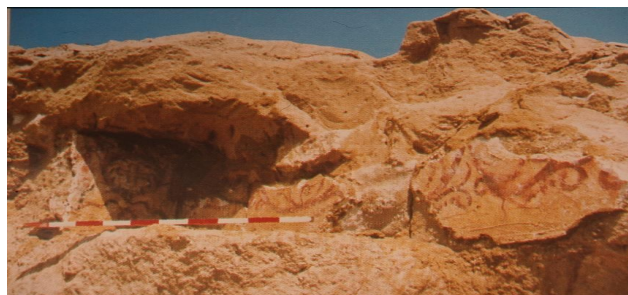
It's described in the literature (e.g. Meyer 1966; Stark 1852) as a platform (probably intended as the altar, *bomos*) serving as a base for a prominent marble pillar surmounted by the statue of the goddess of Aphrodite (Venus) in the shape of an elegant naked woman. The square element occupying the center of the *tetrapylon* on the Madaba map is most likely the remains of this temple. Alternatively, the square element may be the remains of the water clock, described in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Procopius of Gaza. According to his detailed description, an elaborate water clock stood in the center of Gaza, marking the hours both by a bell and by moving bronze figures, representing Helios appearing in each of the twelve doors in turn, and Heracles performing his labors (Stark 1852).

The Byzantine city of Gaza also had a theatre represented on the Madaba map by a massive semi-circular structure in the south eastern corner of the city, i.e. in the south-eastern part of the present al-Zeitun quarter of the old city of Gaza. As seen in the map, the theatre's front was lined by pillars while the highest (back) part is occupied by an awning (*velum* or *velarium*) roofed with baked clay tiles. It's most probably the same theatre mentioned by Sozomen in the first half of the fifth century (Sozomen, NPNF2-02. Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories, book V). In the same street leading to the theatre the mosaic map depicts a large central forum, most probably used for the festivals in the Roman city. It's in the shape of a small rectangular open space with a roofed portico surrounding it in the north, east and west sides. The partly damaged inscription seen immediately below the western gate of Gaza refers to a *Neapolis*. It is no doubt Maioumas, the maritime city, which is mentioned first in the Zeno Papyri (259 BC; Cairo Papyrus 59.006) and is well attested to in ancient sources. It's located approximately two kilometers south of *Anthedon*, the previous sea port of Gaza during the Assyrian period. The inhabitants of Maioumas converted to Christianity en masse in 331 (Meyer: 1966) and in 335 the emperor Constantine the Great rewarded its inhabitants for their unanimous adoption of Christianity by renaming their town "the city of Constantia" in honor of his sister and elevated it to status of a polis as an independent city with its own Bishop (Meyer: 1966). Here at Maioumas saint Porphyry and Marcus Diaconus arrived after their mission to Constantinople in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The Madaba mosaic map depicts Maioumas as a town with a non-colonnaded main street leading to the western gate of the city of Gaza. All the buildings lining the street are roofed by red clay (baked) tiles resembling those of the city of Gaza. Archaeological findings support the importance of Maioumas as a major city. Excavations of modern constructions at various locations on the seashore confirm massive foundations and remains of Byzantine structural fragments such as marble bases, pillars and capitals (mainly Corinthian). They belong to Byzantine domestic buildings of different sizes. In addition, a Byzantine mosaic pavement of a basilica was uncovered at Maioumas. It's dated by its Greek inscription to the year 569 of Gaza Roman calendar corresponding to 508/9 AD (Ovadia: 1981).

In the area between the walled city of Gaza and Maioumas the mosaic map of Madaba depicts a church or a chapel oriented east-west, covered by a gable roof and preceded by a colonnaded porch. According to an inscription associated to the building in the map it's dedicated to Saint Victor, who was buried in Maioumas (Wilkinson 1977:85; Meyer: 1966; Piacenza Pilgrim ca. 570: 33). The location of this building can be identified at al-Fawayda area, where the author uncovered a mosaic pavement in 1994.

Dwellings of Maioumas may be extended around two kilometers to the north as archaeologists uncovered in the present day Iblakhiya area a large Christian cemetery occupied by individual sandstone graves plastered from the inside and decorated in red with floral and geometrical patterns surmounted by crosses.



A plastered Byzantine grave in Iblakhiya (Photo: Moain Sadeq)

Archaeologists of Gaza department of antiquities have also uncovered close to the cemetery a color mosaic pavement in a length of 6.70 m. It was apparently associated with a chapel as it resembles, in terms of techniques, colors and decorative elements other mosaic pavements of Byzantine churches found in Gaza.

### ***Byzantine villages surrounding the city of Gaza***

Various major Byzantine villages played important roles in Gaza history and Christianity during the Byzantine period. They are mentioned in contemporaneous texts, depicted in the Madaba map and attested at archaeological sites. One of them is the village of *Bethelea* which can be identified with the present-day town of Beit Lahya, most likely a corruption of *Bethelea*. The Church historian Sozomen (400-443) mentions *Bethelea* as his birth place and recounts how his grandfather, together with his entire household, converted to Christianity at the hands of Hilarion (Bidez: 1960; Dowling: 1913). According to him, it was well populated with several temples, greatly venerated by the inhabitants for their antiquity and furnishing. Prominent among them was a Pantheon on the summit of the above mentioned artificial mound dominating the whole village (Bidez: 1960). A big historic mound named presently as “*Tell ad-dahab*” (the gold-mound) existed until the 1980s in the area. Here quantities of Byzantine structural fragments, pottery and glass shards were found attesting the remains of a Byzantine settlement. Two urban centers were uncovered within the territories of the present day Beit Lahya. One of them located at the former Israeli settlement of Elei Saini close to the seashore. The site contains remains of a church dated according to the Greek inscription of the mosaic pavements to 544, a thermal bath and domestic structures. The second site is located in the eastern side of Beit lahya, where rescue excavations directed by the author have uncovered remains in two layers. The lower is a sand stone multi-room structure with water well located approximately 3 meters under the surface level and a series of water basins in the surface. The latter are coated from the inside by water proof plaster and connected with each other by pottery pipes. Further excavations and study will define the exact date of the site and whether the water installations are attributed to a winery or a thermal bath.



Multi-room structure at the east of Beit lahya (Photo: Moain Sadeq)



Water proof water basin east of Beit Lahya (Photo: Moan Sadeq)

A second prominent village north of the city of Gaza is “*Asalea*”. It is represented on the mosaic map of Madaba with a three-towered gateway, a location corresponding to the present “an-Nazla”, a municipal area within the territories of Jabalya town. Al-Nazla is most likely a corruption of the name “*Asalea*”. According to the Church historian Sozomen (400-443 AD), *Asalea* was the home of the holy man Alphion, who was converted to Christianity after Hilarion exorcised him from a demon. Toponym *Asalea* also appears in various maps of the Roman Palestine, among them that of Avi-Yonah (Avi-Yonah: 1940). Remains of a massive Byzantine Church in a basilica layout associated with a large cemetery were excavated between 1996 and 2000 on both sides of Salah ad-Din road. These remains occupy, most likely, the center of the village of *Asalea*. All its parts are paved with high quality colored mosaic pavements depicting series of images such as hunt scenes, human figures, animals, birds, floral and geometrical elements, mounds and rivers (Humbert 2000).

The pictorial representations suffer partial damage, which may indicate that the iconoclasts were still active in the Gaza region until the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, seventeen complete and partially damaged Greek inscriptions decorate the mosaic panels commemorating religious persons lying buried at the site, or during whose life the mosaic was paved or donated. It seems that the church continued its service in the beginning of the Islamic period as one of its Greek inscriptions is dated to 732.

The profusion of food items and ceramic vessels depicted on the mosaic pavement of the northern aisle may refer to the gifts of creation, and possibly a rehearsal of the eschatological banquet (Humbert 1999). The church is adjacent to a three aisle chapel dated according to its mosaic carpet to 444 and a baptistery dates from the reign of the emperor Justinian (527-565). A large cemetery consisting of earlier collective burials and surface tombs of individuals was revealed next to the Church complex on the eastern side, which may attest the presence of a large Christian village, probably *Asalea*, during the Byzantine period. A series of other Christian urban centers associated with the city of Gaza were identified along the main road (*via maris*) leading from Gaza to Egypt. One of these is *Thavatha* or *Thabatha* which is represented on the Byzantine mosaic map of Madaba by a single square tower. The historian Sozomenus locates *Thabatha* about seven miles south of Maioumas, on the bank of a stream that flowed into the sea (Bidez: 1960). It is the valley of Gaza which was named *flumen Thabatha*, river of *Thabatha*, after this village during the Roman-Byzantine period (Avi-Yonah: 1954).

*Thabatha* is mentioned as the birth place, in 291 AD, of the monk Hilarion, who introduced monasticism from Alexandria into Palestine. Some scholars locate *Thabatha* at the site of *Khirbat Umm al-Tut* (or *Khirbat Tuta*) on the southern bank of the Gaza valley (Sadeq: 2000). The historic and spiritual value of *Thabatha* lies in the massive monastery built in its vicinity by Saint Hilarion and uncovered in 1991. We know from contemporaneous historical sources that among the suplicants; Hilarion had other visitors to his desert solitude. They built their huts nearby and gradually a Christian community developed and organized monastic way of life around it. The monastery was destroyed by Julian the Apostate (360-363) who brought also devastation to the desert inhabitants. After Julian's death the monastery was rebuilt at the site of *Umm 'Amer*, approximately one kilometer away from *Khirbat Umm al-Tut*.

The monastery complex consists of four churches with a large narthex (cloister), the biggest crypt for pilgrimage found in historical Palestine, a funeral chamber, a baptism hall, a public cemetery, and an extensive cenobite installation. The monastery had well organized infrastructure facilities, including water cisterns, clay-ovens and drainage channels. Its floor was partially paved with limestone, marble slabs and mosaic pavements decorated with geometric patterns, plants, birds and animals. A great 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaic is related to a specific installation for veneration of the relics of the saint Hilarion and a Greek inscription mentioning him.



The Crypt of the monastery of Saint Hilarion (Photo: Moain Sadeq)



Detailed image of a mosaic pavement in the monastery of Saint Hilarion (Photo: Moain Sadeq)

In addition, the monastery was associated with thermal bath, consisting of frigidarium, tepidarium and caldarium halls. The wide space of these halls ensured that the baths could adequately serve the pilgrims and merchants crossing the Holy land from Egypt to Syria through the main route of *via maris*. The monastery was destroyed by the Emperor Julian in 375 and afterwards most likely by the Persian Sassanid invasion in 614 AD.

The thermal bath was associated with water reservoirs, water installations, and open areas for cooking and baking. Several colored mosaic pavements were revealed at the site. The earliest inscription found at the monastery is dated to 539 AD.



The heating installation of the monastery's thermal bath (Photo: Moain Sadeq)

Among the other sites south of Gaza is *Edrain*, represented on the Madaba map by three towered village, meaning that it was larger than *Thabatha* (one tower). It possessed a central building, possibly a church, covered with a gabled roof. *Edrain* is today located at *Khirbat al-'Adar* on the north bank of Gaza valley (Avi-Yonah: 1954). The coastal line of Deir al-Balah was also one of the most urban areas of Gaza Strip during the Roman-Byzantine period. In 1999 the Gaza Department of Antiquities has uncovered a colored mosaic pavement of a three-aisle church dated to 586 according to its Greek inscriptions (Sadeq: 2000). The pavement of the church nave has been lifted, restored in the museum of Arles and displayed, along with many objects, at several archaeological exhibitions in European cities.



Deir al-Balah Byzantine church: mosaic of the nave  
(Photo: Gaza Department of Antiquities)

One of the other major Roman-Byzantine urban areas is *Sycomazon*, located north of *Raphia (Rafah)* and south of *Thabatha* and *Edrain* on the road leading to Egypt. It is also close to *Saltus Gerariticus* and *Saltus Constantiniaces*. The latter were agricultural estates administered by procurators and actors of the *res private* who collected rents from tenant farmers (Haldon: 186). *Sycomazon* had a main urban center named after it (Avi-Yonah: 1954; ad-Dabbagh: 1966-67).

The entire area of *Sycomazon* is in the present area of *Khirbat al-Sheikh Hammuda* within the municipal territories al-Qarara town and the name has been corrupted in the early Islamic period to "*suq mazin*". The indication for an urban byzantine settlement in the area is attested by individual graves, circular stone water wells, fragments of marble pillars with their bases and capitals, lime stone blocks, huge quantities of Roman and Byzantine pottery and glass shards of various objects were found continuously by farmers. Not far away to the south east of *Sycomazon*, the Madaba map represents a village called *Menois*. The author's field survey conducted in Gaza in the period between 1994 and 2000 identified *Menois* as the present day *Khirbat Ma'in*, two kilometer south east of the city of Khan Yunis, where huge number of marble, stone and vessels objects are scattered on the ground surface. In 1995, the Palestinian Department of Antiquities excavated a Byzantine mosaic pavement of a small single aisle building, most likely a chapel, in the town 'Abasan al-Kabira east of Khan Yunis. It is dated according to its Greek inscription to 666 of the Gaza Roman calendar (606 AD).

A Byzantine individual grave oriented towards the east lies close to the northern side of the mosaic. It's most likely attributed to a prominent person, such as a monk or saint who served the building during his life. The grave seems to have been covered by a dome or a vault as the remains of its piers are still *in situ*. Apart from the mosaic pavement and the grave, the excavations at the site revealed various Byzantine objects such as Byzantine pottery and glass shards, marble pillars indicating the existing of a Byzantine urban settlement in the area.

To the north-eastern side of *Menois*, the Madaba map represents the village Seana with two towered gate. This village is identified with the present day *Khirbat Seihan* or *Tell Seihan* located approximately 10 km to the south-east of the city of Gaza (Musil: 1908). The most southern city of the present day Gaza Strip is “Rafah”, a name derived from *Raphia*, one of the Byzantine urban centers depicted on the mosaic map of Madaba. *Raphia* can be identified today at *Khirbat Rafah*, where artifacts dated to various historic eras indicate uninterrupted human occupation at the site extending from the Bronze Age down to the Byzantine period. The Austrian traveler Schumacher stopped at *Khirbat Rafah* in 1886 when archaeological remains were still *in situ*.

In his report, Schumacher describes well-built circular water well, remains of marble pillars, fragments of attic pottery, mosaic fragments and granite columns at the site. He also reports that the two standing granite columns represent the border between Syria and Egypt in his time (Schumacher: 1886) while the Madaba map is describing *Bitolion*, twelve miles south *Raphia*, as the “border of Egypt and Palestine”. Gaza was a main objective of the Muslim army during the Muslim conquests in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The first battle for Palestine seems to have taken place in February 634 at *Dathin*, or *Tadun*, known today at *al-Damitha* within the principal territories of al-Mughazi, a few miles to south of Gaza. The city itself was finally conquered in June or July 637. The Islamic conquest of the area was swift and peaceful starting a new era of Gaza history.

### **To conclude:**

The geo-strategic location of Gaza on the sea road, *via maris*, between the Christian holy sites in Egypt and Palestine has attracted people to settle in the city of Gaza and to establish villages in various locations along *via maris* and also close to the sea and fresh water wells. This is attested by various archaeological sources such as the mosaic map of Madaba, contemporaneous texts, and remains of churches, mosaic pavements, domestic structures, cemeteries and material culture uncovered at a series of Byzantine archaeological sites within the entire territories of the Gaza strip. While it is almost impossible to excavate the Byzantine city of Gaza which is located under the medieval city of Gaza due to its intensive population, the excavated villages allow us today to identify the exact locations of most Byzantine villages, to describe their massive buildings, techniques, decoration and inscriptions of the mosaic pavements.

The study of the artifacts and tools used in the daily life do reflect the social and spiritual life at the excavated sites. The similarities with other items found in Gaza do attest the contact and interrelation between the populations of Gaza city and villages on the one hand and between them and the entire region on the other. The excavated large cemeteries at various sites are a clear evidence for well-populated urban centers in Gaza region during the Byzantine period. The decoration of a large number of tombs and the high quality of the Byzantine massive buildings do indicate the flourishing economy of Gaza at that time. The uncovered installations, massive thermal baths and water reservoirs associated to the churches are evidence of the high quality of planning, architecture and construction techniques.

In addition to the extremely important writings of Mark Diaconus, Sozomen and Jerom, the uncovered remains of churches, chapels, cemeteries, mosaic pavements, architectural fragments and material culture are indispensable elements highlighting the major role which Gaza played in the Christian history, urbanism and history of architecture. The monastery of Saint Hilarion, for instance, was the introducer of monasticism into Palestine and also the monastery architecture into the region. The flourished seaport “*Maioumas*” or “*Constantia*” witnessed the early phase of Christianity long before the construction the first Church in the city of Gaza by Saint Porphyry. *Maioumas* experienced prosperity during the Byzantine period as it attracted new residents continuously, among them foreign groups such as Egyptians, who worked in trade. *Maioumas* also facilitated trade and contacts between Gaza with the Mediterranean regions. Gaza was the main objective of the Muslim army in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Following the first fight against the Byzantine army in 634 at *Dathin* (*Khirbat al-Damitha*), a few kilometers south of the city of Gaza, the city itself was finally taken in June or July of 637 and a new era of demographic distribution began. An early Muslim city was built on top of the Byzantine one and the entire villages surrounding Gaza were abandoned and never re-inhabited.

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