

# **The Crusaders' Strategy Against Fatimid Ascalon and the "Ascalon Project" of the Second Crusade**

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## I

**W**hen the crusaders of the First Crusade reached Palestine in the spring of 1099, the ancient Philistine city of Ascalon was in the hands of the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt.<sup>1</sup> In August of the same year, following the capture of Jerusalem, the crusaders joined battle with a Fatimid expeditionary force near Ascalon.<sup>2</sup> The Egyptians were routed and the governor of Ascalon offered the surrender of the city to Raymond of St. Gilles. Due to a quarrel between Raymond and Godfrey of Bouillon, however, this offer was not taken up, and no attempt to capture Ascalon was made at that time. Occasional spells of peaceful coexistence with the Frankish neighbor notwithstanding,<sup>3</sup> the Fatimid stronghold was henceforth to prove "a thorn in the flesh of the [crusaders'] kingdom."<sup>4</sup> For more than half a century, the so-called "Ascalon strip"<sup>5</sup> became the battleground of frequent clashes between the forces of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and their Saracen adversaries, and of countless raids by both sides. In 1148 Ascalon became, for a short time, the focus of attention of the Second Crusade, but no action against it was taken. By far the last of the seaports in the Levant to fall, Ascalon was not captured by the crusaders until 1153.

This case study is an attempt to analyze the conflict over Ascalon between the Fatimids and the crusaders in the first half of the twelfth century. Several aspects will be dealt with in particular: section II will investigate in what ways Ascalon posed a threat to the Latin Kingdom, and section III how the crusaders responded to that threat. The Frankish strategy to subdue Ascalon may help to explain the outcome of the "Ascalon Project", a rather neglected interlude of the Second Crusade (section IV). Finally, the conclusion will look at some of the implications of the crusaders' course of action for our knowledge of the military history of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (section V).

## II

From the crusaders' point of view, Fatimid Ascalon constituted a dangerous enemy bridgehead on their side of the Sinai desert.<sup>6</sup> Egyptian invading forces frequently crossed the desert in safety, and used Ascalon as a convenient staging area, an operational base, and a place of refuge close to the field of battle.<sup>7</sup> Since the Egyptian outpost was freely accessible both by sea and by land, hostile troops could easily assemble in dangerous proximity to the heartland of the Frankish possessions in the East. As it was, important Frankish centers, such as Jaffa and Jerusalem itself, were within striking range of Ascalon. Egyptian invasions and raids by the garrison frequently took place when the military forces of the Latin Kingdom were committed on other fronts, and few troops were left for the defense of its southwestern frontier; this was the case during the invasion of Galilee by the armies of Maudud of Mosul and Tughtegin of Damascus in 1113, and twice during the siege of Tyre by the crusaders in 1124.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, as in the course of the invasions of 1105 and 1118, Egyptian forces were supported by the Syrian enemies of the crusaders.<sup>9</sup> Ascalon was protected by formidable defensive works; its garrison was relieved several times a year, and clashes between Egyptian troops deployed in that city and Frankish forces were commonplace events.<sup>10</sup> Ascalon was an element of Egypt's naval defense and alert system, and a base of the redoubtable Fatimid navy which increased the operative range of the fleet.<sup>11</sup> Egyptian invasions were frequently supported by naval forces; in complex operations the Fatimid fleet repeatedly landed — and subsequently evacuated — soldiers and siege machines on the beaches of the Latin Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

After a series of full-scale invasions of the Latin Kingdom in the first decades of the twelfth century had ended in defeat for the Egyptians, Ascalon

was used primarily as a staging base for hit-and-run operations by its garrison.<sup>13</sup> These raids ravaged the southwestern parts of the kingdom and severely impaired the efficient administration and colonization of this area.<sup>14</sup> Occasionally, as in 1113 and 1124, raids penetrated as far as the environs of Jerusalem and beyond to Magna Mahumeria (Bira).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the raids harassed the traffic on the Jaffa-Jerusalem route, the principal highway for pilgrims in the Latin Kingdom, and even challenged crusader control over this crucial line of communication.<sup>16</sup> The founding of the military order of the Knights Templar about 1120 was due in part to Ascalonite raiding activities.<sup>17</sup> William of Tyre's report of the beginnings of the Order indicates that the Templars' foremost task was the protection of the pilgrimage routes in the face of ambushes set up by highwaymen (*latrones*) in addition to those of raiders (*incursantes*).<sup>18</sup>

The proximity of Ascalon to the heartland of the Latin Kingdom proved troublesome in yet another respect. In the course of the revolt of Hugh of Jaffa and a number of other nobles in 1133 or 1134 against King Fulk, Hugh defected to Ascalon and concluded a treaty of alliance with its governor, thereby encouraging Ascalonite raids all the way to Arsuf (Tel Arshaf).<sup>19</sup> Even though it was this very move which caused the collapse of Hugh's rebellion, the dangers of involving the enemy in the internal conflicts of the Latin Kingdom were evident. Not surprisingly, just a few years later King Fulk was to take measures both to prevent a possible repetition of this revolt and to subdue Ascalon.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to invasions and raids, Fatimid Ascalon constituted a serious problem for the westward expansion of the Latin Kingdom. The crusaders had cast a covetous eye on Egypt already in the early years of their dominion,<sup>21</sup> well before the rich land of the Nile became the objective of the "battle of Egypt"<sup>22</sup> that was to ensue in the 1160s after the fall of Ascalon. As long as Ascalon was in hostile hands, however, the crusaders were unable to take advantage of the progressively ruinous state of the Fatimid empire toward the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>23</sup> The paramount geostrategic importance of Ascalon for the defense of Egypt was clearly perceived by contemporaries; William of Tyre relates that

the aforementioned lord [i.e. the ruler of Egypt] and his princes exercised great and utmost care for this city. They reasoned that if they lost the city to us, there would be no alternative but that our princes would descend freely and without hindrance upon Egypt and that the kingdom would be conquered by force.<sup>24</sup>

## III

In reaction to the threat from Ascalon, the Jaffa-Jerusalem route was protected by the construction of a number of small forts during the first two decades of Frankish rule.<sup>25</sup> In 1110 and 1123/24, when Western fleets were at the disposal of the Latin Kingdom, it was debated whether the capture of Ascalon should be attempted. Even though there was widespread support for such action on both occasions, at length it was decided to attack Sidon and Tyre respectively.<sup>26</sup> An encounter between the garrison of Ascalon and crusader forces in 1125 almost resulted in the capture of the city.<sup>27</sup> Raids by the Fatimid garrison were still a problem in the 1130s, for William of Tyre states that when the fortress Castellum Arnaldi (Yalu) was constructed about halfway between Jaffa and Jerusalem in 1132, this was done for the purpose of protecting the pilgrims on this route from the habitual sudden attacks of the Ascalonites.<sup>28</sup>

In order to put an end to these raids and to set the stage for the capture of Ascalon, the crusaders embarked on an impressive and eventually efficacious course of action. In 1136, in the reign of King Fulk (1131-43), it was decided by the kingdom's magnates "to construct strongholds in a circle around [Ascalon]".<sup>29</sup> Such castles, the so-called *Gegenburgen*<sup>30</sup> or "blockading fortresses",<sup>31</sup> were not uncommon in the Latin East. The *Gegenburgen* confronting Ascalon had several purposes: one, to check Ascalonite raids; two, to be nuclei of lordships and centers of colonization; and three, to serve as logistic and operational bases for attacks upon Ascalon.<sup>32</sup> Nearly all of these fortresses were of a relatively small and square design, the so-called *castrum* type.<sup>33</sup> Partners in the construction were the crown as well as the secular and clerical nobility of the Latin Kingdom: the *arrière-ban* was regularly proclaimed when one of the fortresses was to be raised.<sup>34</sup>

In the year 1136 the crusaders built the *castrum* Bethgibelin (Bet Guvrin) at a geographically advantageous site at the foothills of the Judaeen mountains. By common consent, Bethgibelin was entrusted to the Order of St. John, and the ten nearby *casalia* were added for good measure.<sup>35</sup> Incidentally, this is one of the earliest instances in which the Hospitallers are associated with strictly military responsibilities.<sup>36</sup> Five years later, in 1141, another *castrum* was constructed near the highway from Ascalon to Ramle/Lydda at a place called Ibelin (Yavne); this castle was given to Balian the Elder, a loyal supporter and vassal of King Fulk, who subsequently took his surname from this fortress.<sup>37</sup> The first two Frankish *Gegenburgen* confronting Ascalon apparently produced the desired effect of checking the Ascalonite raids.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, in the year 1142, the crusaders decided to

build the third *Gegenburg*, the *castrum* Blanchegarde (Tel Tsafit), on a promontory of the Judaeian mountains in order to increase the pressure on Ascalon; after its completion, the fortress remained in the king's possession.<sup>39</sup> And finally, in the spring of 1150, the last of the *Gegenburgen* was constructed in the ruins of the town of Gaza; this stronghold was entrusted to the Templars.<sup>40</sup>

The *Gegenburgen* were located on or close to the main roads leading from Ascalon to Jaffa and Ramle/Lydda, to the Valley of Ayalon and Jerusalem, to Hebron and Bethlehem, and to Egypt respectively, and their garrisons could react quickly to the passage of hostile forces on those routes.<sup>41</sup> At a distance of circa thirty kilometers from Ascalon, about halfway between that city and the highways connecting Jaffa, Jerusalem and Hebron, the first three fortresses had a primarily defensive purpose in that they denied Ascalonite raiders access to the roads and cities in the southwestern region of the kingdom. The castle at Gaza, on the other hand, was offensive in nature, and directly menaced the security of Ascalon by cutting the overland lines of communication between that city and its hinterland Egypt.<sup>42</sup>

After the fortification of Gaza, the Egyptian army ceased to approach Ascalon by land for fear of ambushes set up by the garrisons of the *Gegenburgen*.<sup>43</sup> The Frankish efforts paid off in 1153 when Ascalon was surrendered after a seven-month siege and naval blockade by crusader forces.<sup>44</sup>

#### IV

Quite possibly the crusaders' strategy of building a system of fortresses to confront Ascalon was a major factor in the outcome of the Ascalon Project of the Second Crusade in August 1148, when the system was yet incomplete.<sup>45</sup> Immediately after the abortive siege of Damascus in the course of the Syrian Campaign of that expedition, the three kings, Baldwin III of Jerusalem, Conrad III of Germany and Louis VII of France, convened an assembly of nobles with the intention of bringing the hitherto hapless crusade to a successful conclusion after all.<sup>46</sup> There was a debate in which a number of people proposed to lay siege to Ascalon. They argued that the city was not far away, and that it could be captured easily and quickly (the latter, however, seems hardly a defensible assertion).<sup>47</sup> In light of the troublesome relationship between Fatimid Ascalon and the Latin Kingdom throughout the previous five decades, the capture of that city was certainly a reasonable objective. Apparently some agreement to attack Ascalon was concluded; in

the end, however, most of the Jerusalemite nobles refused to join the Westerners in the campaign, which was thereupon discontinued.<sup>48</sup>

In the absence of any explanation for the foundering of the Ascalon Project in the sources, it can be argued with some plausibility that the noncompliant Jerusalemite barons may have viewed the continuation of their long-standing strategy of containment as more promising than an impromptu assault on the Saracen stronghold. Significantly enough, no attempt to capture Ascalon is reported for the period in which the *Gegenburgen* were built. In 1148, prior to the fortification of Gaza, crusader forces blocking the road from Egypt to prevent reinforcements and supplies from reaching Ascalon would have been dangerously exposed. During the siege of Ascalon in 1153, crusader reconnaissance detachments to the west of Ascalon were indeed deployed close to their base at Gaza.<sup>49</sup> In addition, there is no indication in the sources that in 1148 a fleet was available to impose a naval blockade on Ascalon. Under these circumstances it would have been next to impossible to invest the city completely, and the Ascalon Project could have resulted in little more than a daring but rather desperate attempt to take the strongly fortified and well-defended city by storm.

Even though the Ascalon Project was largely inconsequential, one must not overlook the fact that even after the dismal failure of the Syrian Campaign — then, as now, widely blamed on the Jerusalemites — the Western participants in the ill-fated Second Crusade were still willing to join in an operation for the benefit of the Latin Kingdom. Following the events of the Ascalon Project, however, the majority of the Westerners changed their minds and departed from the Holy Land in a mood of frustration and resentment against their former hosts in the East.

## V

In order to accomplish their purpose of engaging the enemy and suppressing Ascalonite raiding activities, the garrisons of the Frankish *Gegenburgen*, as a rule, joined forces. In describing the *modus operandi* of the troops of Blanchegarde, William of Tyre states that the garrison encountered the enemy “sometimes alone but more often reinforced by men-at-arms from the other strongholds which had been constructed for the same purpose.”<sup>50</sup> This account is borne out by a passage in the memoirs of Usamah ibn Munqidh, a nobleman in the service of the Fatimids who participated in raids on Bethgibelin and Ibelin in 1150. According to Usamah, the crusaders used to have horsemen standing by in the *Gegenburgen* in order to be ready at all

times for an attack upon Ascalon and to intercept Ascalonite raiders; these Frankish units combined forces against the Saracen raiding parties.<sup>51</sup> Some of the *Gegenburgen* were visible from one another, and fire signalling may have facilitated communication and coordination among the garrisons.<sup>52</sup> It is evident that the *Gegenburgen* of the Ascalon strip were not merely a cluster of discrete strongholds; on the contrary, the four castles confronting Ascalon constituted the elements of an interdependent system of fortifications in the sense of the dictum that "the whole is stronger than the sum of its parts".<sup>53</sup> The operation of these fortresses entailed a certain degree of discipline and close cooperation among the lords of the fortresses and their men in order to ensure the success of the system as a whole.

Evidently, in 1136, the crusaders reached a decision about their course of action against Ascalon which they pursued firmly over a considerable period of time. This course of action involved substantial efforts, enormous resources and the continuous support of a great number of people. In light of the controversy over the evidence of the concept of "strategy" in the Middle Ages,<sup>54</sup> it can be argued that the facts about the Frankish *Gegenburgen* confronting Ascalon strongly suggest that in this particular instance the crusaders developed a complex strategy — in the original, military sense of the word — in order to respond to the threat Ascalon posed to their security.<sup>55</sup>

What is most remarkable about the crusaders' strategy against Ascalon, however, is that this strategy of containment was implemented at a time when the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was subject to internal strife of no small proportions on account of the struggle for power between King Fulk and Melisende, and Melisende and Baldwin III, respectively.<sup>56</sup> The constitutional crisis of the kingdom was resolved only in the civil war of 1152. And yet in these troubled times, in which various factions within the ruling élite of the kingdom promoted their particular and conflicting interests, evidently there was adopted a long-term strategy which required the unreserved cooperation of these very factions in the construction and the day-to-day operation of the *Gegenburgen* for the benefit of the realm as a whole. Failure, however brief, of the lords of these castles to cooperate would have endangered the entire project to subdue Fatimid Ascalon, and could have proved extremely harmful and even dangerous for the kingdom itself. In that sense, the Frankish system of *Gegenburgen* confronting Ascalon is not only an example of a successfully implemented crusader strategy, but also an indication of the far-reaching commitment of the ruling élite of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem to the external security of the Christian commonwealth in the East toward the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>57</sup>

## NOTES

1. On Ascalon and its history in general, see: Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 114-30.
2. On these events, see: Prawer, *Histoire*, vol. 1, pp. 252-53; Richard, *Latin Kingdom*, vol. A (1979), pp. 19-20.
3. Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 108-110.
4. Prawer, *Kingdom 2*, p. 21.
5. Prawer, *Crusader Institutions*, p. 478.
6. Prawer, *Kingdom 2*, pp. 21-22. For the crusaders' concept of security in this region, see also: Prawer, *Crusader Institutions*, pp. 477-78.
7. Prawer, *Histoire*, vol. 1, pp. 246-47; cf. Smail, p. 126.
8. Fulcher, *Historia 2*, bk. 2, ch. 49 [12], pp. 572-73; bk. 3, ch. 28 [2-4], pp. 697-98; bk. 3, ch. 33 [1-3], pp. 731-32; and Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 11, ch. 20, p. 525; bk. 13, ch. 8, p. 595; bk. 13, ch. 12, pp. 599-600.
9. For 1105, see: Fulcher, *Historia 2*, bk. 2, ch. 31 [1], pp. 489-90; Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 70-71. For 1118, see: Fulcher, *Historia 2*, bk. 3, ch. 2 [1], pp. 617-18; Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 12, ch. 6, pp. 552-53.
10. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 13, ch. 17, pp. 606-608; bk. 14, ch. 22, pp. 659-61; bk. 17, chs. 22-23, pp. 790-93. See also: Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 121-30.
11. Ehrenkreutz, "Naval History", p. 102; Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, p. 19. On the operations of the Fatimid fleet and the naval base at Ascalon, see also: Pryor, pp. 114-16, 124-25.
12. For example, Fulcher, *Historia 2*, bk. 2, ch. 33 [1], pp. 501-502; bk. 2, ch. 53 [4], p. 585; bk. 3, ch. 2 [1], pp. 617-18; bk. 3, ch. 17 [1-5], pp. 661-63; and Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 11, ch. 3, pp. 498-500; bk. 11, ch. 24, pp. 531-32; bk. 12, ch. 21, pp. 571-73.
13. Smail, p. 84; Richard, *Latin Kingdom*, vol. A, pp. 22-24.
14. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 22, pp. 659-61; bk. 18, ch. 1, pp. 809-810. See also: Pringle, *Red Tower*, p. 127. On raiding in general, cf.: Gillingham, "Richard I", pp. 83-86.
15. Fulcher, *Historia 2*, bk. 2, ch. 49 [12], pp. 572-73; bk. 3, ch. 28 [2-4], pp. 697-98; bk. 3, ch. 33 [1-3], pp. 731-32; and Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 11, ch. 20, p. 525; bk. 13, ch. 8, p. 595; bk. 13, ch. 12, pp. 599-600.
16. For example, Fulcher, *Historia 2*, bk. 2, ch. 37 [2-5], pp. 514-18; Usamah, p. 158; see also: Barber, "Origins", pp. 220-21.
17. Cf.: Barber, "Origins", pp. 224-25.
18. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 12, ch. 7, pp. 553-55.
19. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 16, pp. 652-53; see also: Mayer, "Melisende", pp. 102-111; Mayer, *Crusades*, pp. 83-85.
20. Tibble, pp. 49-51.



21. Smail, p. 22; Prawer, *Crusader Institutions*, p. 472.
22. Ehrenkreutz, "Naval History", p. 102. On the struggle for the control of Egypt, see: Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, pp. 35-54, 79-80; Mayer, *Crusades*, pp. 117-22.
23. On the decline of the Fatimid empire, see: Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin*, pp. 12-18.
24. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, ch. 22, p. 792, lines 39-44: "multam enim et maximam tam predictus dominus quam eius principes pro eadem urbe gerebant sollicitudinem, arbitantes quod si illa deficeret, in nostrorum veniens dicionem, nichil restaret aliud quam ut libero et sine difficultate accessu nostri principes in Egyptum descenderent, regnum violenter occupaturi." See also: bk. 14, ch. 22, pp. 659-61; bk. 17, ch. 22, pp. 790-92.
25. Fedden & Thomson, p. 24.
26. For 1110, see: Fulcher, *Historia* 2, bk. 2, ch. 44 [1-4], pp. 543-47. For 1123/24, see: Fulcher, *Historia* 2, bk. 3, ch. 27 [1], pp. 693-94; bk. 3, ch. 28 [1], pp. 695-96; Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 12, ch. 24, pp. 575-77.
27. Fulcher, *Historia* 2, bk. 3, ch. 46 [2-7], pp. 773-4; Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 13, ch. 17, pp. 606-608.
28. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 8, pp. 639-40; Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 314-16.
29. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 22, line 21, p. 660: "municipia in circuitu per girum edificari."
30. Smail, pp. 209-213.
31. Fedden & Thomson, p. 24.
32. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 22, pp. 659-61; bk. 15, ch. 25, pp. 707-709. See also: Prawer, *Crusader Institutions*, pp. 102-107, 119-26; Pringle, *Red Tower*, pp. 12-14.
33. On the *castrum* and these fortresses in particular, see: Smail, pp. 230-36; Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 173-75, 280-82; Prawer, *Kingdom* 2, pp. 22-23, 280-82.
34. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 22, pp. 659-61; bk. 15, ch. 25, pp. 707-709; bk. 17, ch. 12, pp. 775-77.
35. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 22, pp. 659-61; Röhricht, *Regesta*, no. 164, pp. 40-41; Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 185-88.
36. Riley-Smith, *Knights*, pp. 52-53, 435-37.
37. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 15, ch. 24, pp. 706-707; Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 207-209. On Balian, see: Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 14, ch. 16, pp. 652-53; Tibble, pp. 45-46.
38. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 15, ch. 25, pp. 707-709.
39. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 15, ch. 25, pp. 707-709; Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, p. 205.
40. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, ch. 12, pp. 775-77; bk. 20, ch. 20, pp. 937-39; and Usamah, pp. 34-35. Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 189-94; Mayer, "Melisende", p. 143.
41. See the maps in Prawer, *Histoire*, vol. 1 (1969), pp. 331, 662.
42. Prawer, *Kingdom* 2, pp. 22-23, 282.

43. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, ch. 12, pp. 775-77.
44. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, chs. 21-30, pp. 789-805; Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 314-17.
45. On the concepts of "strategy" and "system," see section V of this chapter.
46. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, ch. 7, pp. 768-69. On the Ascalon Project, see also: Kugler, pp. 201-204; Berry, p. 510.
47. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, ch. 7, pp. 768-69.
48. *Urkunden Konrads*, no. 197, pp. 356-57; *Cont. Praemon.*, p. 454.
49. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 17, ch. 23, pp. 792-93.
50. Wm. of Tyre, *Chronicon*, bk. 15, ch. 25, lines 31-33, p. 708: "frequenter per se, frequentius adiunctis sibi ex aliis municipiis, ad usus similes edificatis, militibus."
51. Usamah, pp. 41-42.
52. Cf. Fedden & Thomson, p. 12; Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, pp. 269-70.
53. Cf. Benvenisti, *Crusaders*, p. 282.
54. Cf. Gillingham, "Richard I", pp. 78-79.
55. Cf. Praver, *Kingdom 2*, p. 22.
56. On these events, see: Mayer, "Melisende", passim.
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