ABSTRACT:
South-Western Palestine in general and Gaza region in specific present a large number of archaeological sites and historical buildings dating back to the different historical urban sequence. The archaeological excavations conducted in Gaza region since the late 19th century down to the present day yielded rich archaeological evidence of urban evolution since the 4th Millennium BC. The excavated stratified occupational sequence of ancient cities and villages is represented by the explored architecture in different local and imported construction material, biological remains, and diverse of local and imported artifacts. This visual evidence enables scholars to reconstruct the different elements of Gaza urban profile through Ages and to identify the interaction between the people on the one hand and the environment and the surrounding regions on the.

In parallel to the archaeological results the records of Ancient Egypt, engraved on temple walls and in mud tablets are most important sources of the urban history since the Bronze Age. During the last decade Palestinian and Palestinian-European archaeologists have brought to the light a large number of artifacts that remained in Gaza to the first time in history. This is a further distinguished element for evaluating the regional urban development. The radiometric analysis and C14 of biological remains as well as the advanced remote sensing technologies for exploring unexcavated architectural and metal remains enable scholars, students and local people to view and study the visual evidence of the six thousand years history of urbanism and urbanization.

1. INTRODUCTION
The important geo-strategic region of south-western Palestine was settled by urban Canaanite communities since the 4th millennium BC. Besides the historical records, ancient inscriptions, and traveler reports, successive archaeological excavations carried out in the region has scraped away the layers of series of sites containing ruins of cities and villages. Since the Neolithic period the fertile southwestern of Palestine attracted tribes to settle and create the earliest human sediments to establish villages and cities in the Gaza Mediterranean coastal zone, on mounds to the east of it, along the Gaza valley and ancient route connecting Egypt in the south with Canaan (Palestine), Syria, Mesopotamia in the north and east. Due to its location on the ancient rout and its environmental setting between the sea in the west and the mounds and desert in the east, as well as the fertile valley, Gaza region possesses a large number of archaeological sites provide scholars with plenty of visual evidences enabling them to layout and describe the earliest urban evolution phase founded in the region and to trace the urbanism and urbanization development process in the region in an uninterrupted historical sequence.

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Although a large number of essays have attempted to understand the urban development in Palestine, many further studies are still needed to explore more elements of the urban evolution and development as well as the variant urban implications based on discovered urban elements, architecture and material culture.

In the view of urban development in Gaza region this paper endeavors to illuminate the location and environmental setting, the earliest urban evolution phase, and the urban locations and implications during the Bronze Age (3200-1200 BC), the Iron Age and Persian Period (1200-332), the Greek and Hellenistic periods (332-64 BC), the Roman-Byzantine period (64 BC-637 AD), and since the beginning of the Islamic period (in the 7th century) down to the present day.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The important geo-strategic Southwestern Palestine was settled by communities of hunters and farmers since the 4th millennium BC.

The end of the Bronze Age (1200 BC) marked the battles between Rameses III (c. 1175 - 1144 BC) and the Philistines, “People of the sea”, who gave the region its name - Philistia. Gaza became the most powerful of the Philistine five cities (Gaza, Ascalon, Asdod, Ekron, and Gath).2

Tiglath-Pileser III (734-732 BC), the founder of the Assyrian empire captured the city of Gaza and made it subject to Assyria. The decline of the Assyrian Empire led a new conqueror to the lands of Philistia. The Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar II defeated the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies in 605 BC. Gaza came under Babylonian control in 601/2 BC and became a garrison town.3

The Babylonian domination was short lived. In 539 Gaza was invaded by the Persians and in autumn of 332 BC by Alexander the Great. After his death it became a focal point in the struggles between Alexander’s successors, first being ruled by the Ptolemies (312 - 198 BC) and then taken over by the Seleucids.

The Roman rule of Gaza began in 64 BC; the city resumed its ancient prosperity. Gaza maintained its prominent position during the entire Roman period. Later it certainly became a Roman military colony.

Gaza was the main objective of the Moslem army in 637.4 During the Umayyad period (661-750) and the Abbasid period (749-1258), Gaza was part of the Islamic empire. In 767-82 the city was the birthplace of Muhammad al-Shafi‘i, the great jurist consult and founder of the Shafi‘i school of Islamic law.

Gaza was afterwards occupied by the Crusaders. In order to block the coastal road and prevent supplies and reinforcements reaching Ascalon from Egypt, the Crusaders used the fortifications of Deir al-Balah (ad-Darum),5 south of Gaza. The historical an-Nasr (victory) mosque of an-Nasr mosque, located in Beil Hanun to the north of Gaza, was built as a memorial to the battle waged in 637/1239 in the area between the Moslems and the Crusaders.

3 Dowling 1913: 30
4 Glucker 1987: 4
5 A Semitic word means “south”. The name was still in use until the Mamluk period referring to the area as a post and caravan station on the way leading from Egypt to Damascus.
Beibars, the Emir and later, the Mamluk Sultan (1260-1277) stopped the new invaders, the Mongols, in their tracks as they threatened Egypt and forced them into retreat. He defeated them at ‘Ain Jalut in Palestine in 1260.

During the Mamluk period (1250-1517), Gaza region belonged to the province of Damascus, though at times it was independent. The town enjoyed economic prosperity.

In 1516, during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Salim I, the city fell to the Ottoman Turks and became part of their empire until 1917, when it was captured by the British army and remained under British mandatory rule until 1948, when it was administrated by the Egyptians with the exception of a few months in 1956 of Israeli occupation, until 1967, when the main Israeli occupation began. In May 18th, 1994 the Israeli troops left their military headquarters in the center of the city of Gaza and the Palestinian Authority was established.

3. URBAN LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING
The location of south-western Palestine is dominated since the Early Bronze age by important geographical, topographical and environmental factors. One of the most important and dominant factor is the ancient route or high way connecting Egypt in the south with Canaan/Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia in the north and east. In the Old Egyptian inscriptions this high way was referred to as Horus-way, in the Old Testament as “the way to the land of the Philistines”, during the Greek and Roman periods as “via maris”, means the sea way, and during the Islamic periods as “ad-darb as-sultani”, the sultan way, referring to the Mamluk sultans who used it in their travel between Cairo, their capital, and Damascus.

This highway runs along the Mediterranean seashore, crossing south-western Palestine through ancient cities such as Raphia, Gaza, Asdud, Ascalon and Gath. Hundreds of archaeological sites were surveyed and some of them were excavated along this way in Egypt and Palestine. From this way some subways lead to the eastern inland regions.

The urban evolution in southwestern Palestine was impacted during the sequent historical phases by the environmental setting as well. In this region there are, in general, some common elements as such in the Western Negev and Northern Sinai.

The southern coastal zone of south-western Palestine extends into northern Sinai. It is comprised of great and extensive quantities of sand transformed into dune-terrains further inland.

The sand dunes are located above the alluvial soil. Nevertheless the cliffs close to the beach contains in most area only alluvial stratum.

The Pleistocene coastal landscapes are represented by cemented calcareous (locally called kurkar. The calcarenites occur as longitudinal ridges that span much of coastal plain, and extend well into trends, becoming increasingly older eastwards.

The most potential environmental factor in southwestern Palestine is the valley of Gaza. Its water, fertile soil and its access to the sea, as well as its flora and fauna attracted people since the 4th millennium BC to settle and establish urban life along its both banks.

For human subsistence activities in the region, the Mediterranean provided lush herbaceous vegetation which promoted raising herds of domesticated herbivores. Annual grasses with large seeds such as wheat, adapted to local environmental conditions, were domesticated and function at present as one of the basic sources of food for humankind.

Pulses were domesticated too from wild species growing at present in the region. Olives, the fruits of which have been used since prehistoric times, still grow as an important component.
Fresh rain and ground water still at present support wild date palms, as they probably did in the past. Such populations could have been the primary populations used for the domestication of dates\(^6\).

The former various factors are associated with major archaeological sites in southwestern Palestine and in Gaza region in specific providing essential visual evidences enabling us to trace the urban development in the region through Ages.

**4. EARLIEST RABAN REMAINS**

Since the late 19\(^{th}\) century down to the present day hundreds of archaeological excavations were conducted in Palestine. The earliest excavated site in Gaza region so far is Tell Ridan, located on the seashore of Khan Younus. It is dated to the Neolithic period (to around 6\(^{th}\) – 5\(^{th}\) millennium BC). The explored archaeological remains indicate urban subsistence, reflected in the modest architecture and the used material culture at the site.

**5. THE URBAN EVOLUTION DURING THE EARLY BRONZE AGE**

The following phase of urban development in Gaza region is represented, rather in an advanced presence, in series of explored Bronze Age sites (3200-1200 BC) located along the Gaza valley, extending between the most southern borders of the present day Deir al-Balah and the city of Gaza. The most important Bronze Age urban sites/cities discovered so far in Gaza region are the sites of Taur Ikhbeineh, Tell es-Sakan, Tall-al-Ajjul.

**5.1. TAUR IKHBEINAH\(^7\)**

The earliest urban presence in Gaza during the Bronze age is located at the site of Taur Ikhbeineh on the west bank of Gaza valley (Wadi Ghazza), about 3 km from the Mediterranean. Based on calibrated radiocarbon analysis the site of Taur Ikhbeineh should be dated to 3400-3300 or 3250 BC at the least. The stratified architectural remains at the site indicate four occupational phases dated to the Early Bronze comprised two floors, pits as well as sediment into which the pits were cut. The excavated deposits are represented by rich assemblages of stone implements and flint tools, faunal and botanic remains as well as a large collection of ceramics. The material culture discovered at the site proves developed Industry and relation with the surrounding regions.

**5.2. Tell ES-SAKAN\(^8\):** Earliest walled city within Gaza region

Following to Taur Ikhbeinah, the earliest discovered example of the urbanism in Gaza area is located in Tell es-Sakan, bordering the northern side of al-Zahra’ village to the southwest of Gaza city. This site was discovered in 1998 during construction activities. Large scale of archaeological excavations started there under the field direction of the paper’s author and Prof. Pierre Miroshedji.

The earliest urbanism at the site is located in the lowest stratum. It confirms a dominated Egyptian influence dated the end of the fourth millennium BC an. The building remains in

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\(^6\) Levy 1999: 37.

\(^7\) Oren/Yektiel 1990: 361-384

\(^8\) Miroshedji/Sadeq 2001: 75-104
mud-brick and the many associated domestic installations (kilns, hearths) are of Egyptian type. One should mention fragments of clay sealing with cylinder-seals imprints and several serekhs, which is the heraldic of Na’armer, the first Pharaoh of the Old Egyptian Dynasty. The earliest city discovered at the site has a successive wall in mud-brick reaches a thickness of 3, 55 m. The site of Tell es-Sakan is presently the oldest known archaeological site containing a walled city impacted by the Egyptian culture and fortification system, and the only one of its kind outside the Nile valley. For unknown reasons the oldest walled city was abandoned for several centuries. Nevertheless the thick layers of ashes debris indicate that the city was burnt as a result of a war or an accidental fire. Much later, after the abandonment, the site has been reoccupied in the Early Bronze III and a new city-wall in mud brick has been built on the eroded remains of the former City Wall, following an almost parallel line. The higher strata of Tell es-Sakan are dated to the Early Bronze III. They contain ruins of a Canaanite city surrounded by a wall that has been built about 3 m in front of the preceding rampart, with a thickness of 3, 80 m and preserved on a height of 1, 8 m. The buildings inside the city were built during two phases of construction. The imbrications of the houses are worth mentioning because it implies a strong degree of urbanization. The rooms of the dwellings usually possess inner benches against one, two or three walls. The domestic installations are frequent. The floors and the walls are lime plastered. The archaeological material uncovered in the floors is abundant and varied (pottery, flint tools, domestic instruments and beads). Its characters betray both a strong local particularize and close ties with the sites of inner Palestine.

At the Canaanite city the excavations explored a street oriented southeast north-west between two rows of dwellings comprised of rooms and courtyards. The street was followed by a drainage which formed a deep channel slowly filled up. This climax precedes shortly the abandonment of the site at the beginning of the third millennium BC. At the same time, in the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age a new city was established in Tel al-‘Ajul, approximately 700 meters southeast of Tel as-Sakan.

6. URBAN EVOLUTION DURING THE MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGE
The most important archaeological evidences of the urban evolution in Gaza during the Middle and Late Bronze Age are located on the northern bank of Gaza valley; at the site of Tell al-‘Ajul and its northern extension in al-Mughraqa area.

6.1 TELL AL-‘AJUL
The site of Tell al-‘Ajul lies approximately 6 km southwest of the center of modern Gaza city, and 1.8 km from the Mediterranean coast. The site contains the ruins of a city, constructed in several historical phases, dated to the Middle and Late Bronze Age. Flinders Petrie, who excavated at the site between 1930 and 1934, concluded that Tell al-‘Ajul had been the site of Gaza in the Middle Bronze and part of the Late Bronze Ages. It is more

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9  Loc.cit.
probable; however, that the ancient Gaza was located within the confines of the modern city, where a sounding uncovered remains from the Late Bronze and Early Iron ages\(^{11}\). The earliest City at Tell al-‘Ajjul is located in the deepest stratum. Its main layout constituting roads, gates, and fortification system, was set during the late twelfth Dynasty. Once the defenses were complete, a city plan was laid out along orderly lines. A ring road encircled the city within the line of the fosse, flanked by buildings. Another thoroughfare ran diagonally from the southeast to the northwest corners. A branch road took a circuitous route toward the same point.

The original main entry was apparently in the center of the northeast side, facing modern Gaza. Emerging from the causeway and extending some 152 m into the plain were curious tunnels, fewer than 2 m in depth, with openings at intervals in the roofs. The tunnels are provided with openings in the top\(^{12}\).

The second city at the site was erected on the same outlines of the earlier one. It was founded in about 1670 BC. This is testified to by scarabs found in the city’s building deposits. The destruction can also be dated however, with the help of scarabs found in destruction deposits and graves to about 1570 BC. It was probably destroyed by the armies of Ahmose. The remains of the last city are badly preserved. The excavated fort at this city, which is also called “palace”, contained an important find: the double seal impression of Thutmose III and Hatshepsut found in its upper debris.

The decline of the city in the Late Bronze Age I (end of the 15\(^{th}\) century BC) brought almost total abandonment to the site. The site indicated industry and relation with contemporary civilizations. The majority of the imported pottery comes from Cyprus but it derives also from Egypt, Greece and the Jordan Valley, and maybe also from the northern Levant. The Cypriot-imported wares include Red-on-Black, White Slip I (mainly bichrome-decorated) and Red Lustrous Wheel-made and possibly also vessels of the Bichrome Wheel-made Ware. The alabaster vessels and the faience/glass object of unknown function very probably belong to the group of objects which were imported from Egypt, or they were locally produced. Gold, silver, bronze and lead objects are certainly also imports from different regions of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Late White Slip, which has been found at Tell al-‘Ajjul, found also at the Late Bronze Age Cemetery discovered in Deir al-Balah, which lies approximately 10 km southwest of Tell al-‘Ajjul. The latest appearance of these wares is dated to the 13\(^{th}\) century, the reign of Sethos I and Ramses II. The Mycenaean type perfum jar can be dated to the first half of the 13\(^{th}\) century\(^{13}\).

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11 Loc.cit.
12 Petrie Vol. 2 1931: 63. For further details on the site see Petrie’s five volumes.
7. URBAN EVOLUTION DURING THE IRON AGE

7.1. THE PHILISTINE PERIOD
The end of the Bronze Age (1200 BC) marked the battles between Rameses III (c. 1175 - 1144 BC) and the Philistines, “People of the sea”, who gave the region its name - Philistia. Gaza became the most powerful of the Philistine cities (Gaza, Ascalon, Asdod, Ekron, and Gath). The Philistine city of Gaza was located on the mound, where the present day old city of Gaza exists, nevertheless no comprehensive archaeological excavations conducted yet in the area to explore visual evidences of the Philistine city during the 12th century BC.

7.2. THE ASSYRIAN PERIOD
During the Assyrian period (734-732 BC), Gaza consolidated its economy and continued to reap profit from the Arabian trade of spices, incense, perfume and other luxury goods. Its control enabled Assyria to extend its rule further into Arabia. The most important archaeological evidence of urbanism in Gaza during the Assyrian period are the discovered ruins of the city of Anthedon in al-Bilakhiyya area located on the north western beach of the city of Gaza. According to the preliminary results of the Palestinian-French excavations at the site, the city of Anthedon was surrounded by a wall build of mud bricks, part of which was uncovered along the site cliff. The explored city rampart is still intact in about 8 m. high and in thickness of about 6 meters. The solid structure of the rampart illuminates the construction system, construction material during the Assyrian period and gives indications for the developed construction way during the Assyrian period. The site of Anthedon was occupied during the Babylonian, Greek and Hellenistic periods.

7.3. THE BABYLONIAN DOMINATION
The decline of the Assyrian Empire led a new conqueror to the lands of Philistia. The Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar II defeated the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies in 605 BC. Gaza came under Babylonian control in 601/2 BC and became a garrison town. The first destruction occurred to Anthedon walls were during the Babylonian invasion. The Babylon period was short lived. So there are no urban visual remains left dated to this period.

8. DURING THE PERSIAN PERIOD
During the Persian period (539 - 332 BC) Gaza city was still in its location on the mound of the present day. From historical sources describing the invasion of Gaza by Alexander the Great in 332 BC we know that the city was walled. It was defended by a joint Arab-Persian garrison under the leadership of Bates, the city ruler. The harbor of Gaza, Anthedon, in al-Bilakhiyya area, seems to have been used during the Persian period. The Palestinian-French excavation at the site explored a stratum containing structures dated to this period.

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14 Excavations at the site were conducted for five years by the Palestinian Dept. of Antiquities and the French Ecole Biblique. The final excavation report is under preparation.
Many sites of this period along the highway between Egypt and Canaan have been explored. One of them is the site of Tell Ruquish, on the Mediterranean coast of Deir al-Balah, about 18 km southwest of Gaza. According to the explored structures at the site a city dated back to the Persian period was explored. It had a massive city wall bound the settlement in south. It is about 5.5 m thick and preserved to a height of at least 5 m. To the north of these structures the city enclosure ends in a prominent mound, about 2 a. in size, where impressive remains of fortifications were found. The site measured about 150 m by 650 m and covered some 20 to 25 a.; total length of the defense wall was approximately 1.6 km.

9. DURING THE GREEK-HELLENISTIC PERIOD
In the autumn of 332 BC Gaza was strong enough to resist for two months of siege by Alexander of Macedon (Alexander the Great) during which he was wounded. It was ultimately taken by storm, but not entirely destroyed. Bates, the Persian city ruler, defended the city with help of Arab soldiers.

During the Hellenistic period, the Gaza region became a focal point in the struggles between Alexander’s successors, first being ruled by the Ptolemies (312 - 198 BC) and then taken over by the Seleucids.

The excavations on Tell al-'Ajjul (on the northern bank of the Gaza valley) and the collected Greek pottery at several sites along the seashore of the Gaza region, including Anthedon, provide clear evidence of the Hellenistic period. As during the Egyptian and the Assyrian periods, Raphia (Rafah) was also inhabited in this period. Its ruins are located in Khirbat Rafah. The city was mentioned by the historian Josephus as being conquered by Alexander Janneus, and being rebuilt and reinhabited by Gabinius. In Raphia Cleopatra was married and the place became later the seat of a Bishop. It was also a place of worship for Artemis and Apollo. In 1817 the ruins of a large temple were also discovered there.

10. URBAN DEVELOPMENT DURING THE ROMAN-BYZANTINE PERIOD
Around 64 AD the great Roman general, Pompey, set off on a campaign to capture the principalities of Asia Minor and eventually arrived in Syria. Palestine came Gaza’s Hellenistic phase to an end. The city resumed its ancient prosperity. The newly built free maritime city began a “new era” from the time of Pompey. The following is a description for the urban development in the city of Gaza and the surrounding area during the Roman-Byzantine period.

10.1. THE WALLED CITY OF GAZA
It is generally accepted, that the Roman-Byzantine city of Gaza was built on the same present day around mound of the old city. On the Byzantine mosaic map of Madaba, the city of Gaza is represented as the second largest city of Palestine after Jerusalem. It is walled and provided with towers. Only the right hand half, namely the southern half of the city, is extant.

Based on the art-historical and archaeological analysis of the plan of Gaza in the Madaba map, it represents only one church. It is located in the south western corner of the city in the

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15 Oren/Yekutieli 1992: 361-384
16 Dowling 1913: 60
17 Meyer 1966: 77
present day al-Zeitun quarter of the old city of Gaza, which is well known as the traditional quarter of the Christian community, where the Greek orthodox church of Porphyrius and the Christian cemetery exists. The Madaba map shows main colonnaded streets lined with stoas. They are represented by white columns and red roofs, and apparently lead to gates in the city walls. The streets are running north-south and east-west crossing the centre of the city. Some public buildings of the city are clearly to be seen in the map, among them a rectangular open space in the cross of the main three streets of the city leading each to one of the city gates. This open space should be a forum.

The plan of Gaza in the Madaba map represent also a semi-circular structure of a possibly theatre located in the south eastern corner of the city. The back border of the theatre is represented in the map with a tiled roof. The front border is lined with pillars. This theatre should be according to the Madaba map in the east-southern part of al-Zeitun quarter of the old city of Gaza.

10.1.1 THE SEA HARBOR “MAIOUMAS/CONSTANTIA”

The partially damaged inscription immediately below the western gate of the city of Gaza on Madaba map refers to a Neapolis, of which name is damaged. We have no doubt that the only town directly to the west of the city is Maioumas, the harbor city, of which inhabitants went over to Christianity in a body in 331. On the Byzantine mosaic map of Madaba Maioumas is represented as an urban area with a wide street (not colonnaded) crossing it from east to west. Some buildings have the same kind of the red roofs as the city of Gaza. The archaeological evidence of the urbanism in Maioumas is a colored mosaic pavement of a basilica plan dated to 569 of the Gaza calendar (508/9 AD). To the north of Maioumas, in al-Bilakhiyya area, there are the remains of a public building dated to the Roman-Byzantine period. Its façade has a length of about 110 m. To the north of this wall a large Byzantine cemetery as well as a colored mosaic pavement (probably of a chapel) was recently explored by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities.

10.2. ECVAE TED ROMAN-BYZANTINE VILLAGES AROUND GAZA CITY

The city of Gaza surrounding urban areas are mentioned in the historical sources and depicted in Madaba map as well. The archaeological excavations conducted in Gaza area provided us with recent visual evidences of urban villages surrounding the city of Gaza as the following.

10.2.1. ASALEA

The Byzantine mosaic map of Madaba represents a village called "Asalea" as three-towered gateway to the north of the city of Gaza. It is suggested that this village was located in the same spot of the present-day al-Nazla.

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19 For further details on the life of Saint Porphyrius and the church of Eudoxia see: Diaconus 1913.
20 Meyer 1966: 60; Sadeq 2000: 31
21 For more details on the Gaza calendar during the Roman-Byzantine period see: Clermont-Ganneau 1899: 419-429; Meyer 1966: 125
On the left side of the main road leading from Gaza to Beit Hanun- (Erez-) checkpoint a religious Byzantine compound was discovered. It comprises a church in a basilica plan along with domestic rooms and infrastructure. The compound is paved partially with colored mosaic pavements decorated with different scenes and provided with Greek inscriptions. This church and a contemporary cemetery to the south-east of it were explored by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities.

10.2.2. THAVATHA OR THABATHA
Thabatha is depicted on the Byzantine mosaic map of Madaba to the south of the city of Gaza, represented by a small square tower and an inscription refers to it. Thabatha is mentioned as the birth place of the monk Hilarion in 291 AD, who introduced monasticism into Palestine. Some scholars locate the village of Thabatha in the site of Khirbat Umm al-Tut (or Khirbat Tuta) on the southern bank of the valley of Gaza in the municipal territory of al-Nuseirat.

Further archaeological evidences are the ruins of the monastery of Saint Hilarion which were discovered in 1991 at the archaeological site of Umm ‘Amer, located approximately 1 km to the south-east of Khirbat Umm al-Tut.

The excavations at the site uncovered a religious Christian complex with a monastery and churches built in a basilica form during sequent historical phases. The monastery is provided by infrastructure such as public bath complex, water reservoirs, water installations, and open areas for cooking and baking. Several colored mosaic pavements were uncovered in the site containing Greek inscriptions. The earliest inscription found in the site is a funeral one engraved in a marble slab dated to 539 AD.

10.2.3. AURBAN EVOLUTION ON THE COAST OF DEIR AL-BALAH
During the Roman-Byzantine period urban areas seem to be started in Deir al-Balah. In 1999 a colored mosaic pavement of a church was discovered by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities on the coast of Deir al-Balah. It is dated to 586 AD. The building remains indicate clear evidence to a community lived at that area during the Roman-Byzantine period.

10.2.4. URBANISM IN THE AREA OF THE PRESENT DAY ‘ABASAN
The present day village of ‘Abasan al-Kabira a Byzantine colored pavement (9 x 4 m) was uncovered. According to its Greek inscription it is dated to 666 of the Gaza calendar, corresponding with the year 606 AD. Further archaeological remains are expected to be discovered in the site surrounding area.

10.2.5. THE SITES AROUND GAZA
The Byzantine map of Madaba as well as the historical sources gives more evidences for further, but not excavated villages around Gaza city. They are Bethelea (Beit Lahya), Edrain
(Khirbat al-‘Adar), Sycomazon (Khirbat al-Sheikh Hammuda), Menois (Khirbat Ma’in), Seana (Khirbat or Tell Seihan), Raphia (Khirbat Rafah)27.

11. DURING THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

11.1. THE OLD CITY OF GAZA

The main urban evolution in Gaza region during the Islamic period was in the old city of Gaza, where an Islamic city started to develop there. The lower stratum of the present day old city of Gaza contains the ruins of the preceding described walled city of Gaza during the Roman-Byzantine period.

During the Crusade period the crusaders erected the cathedral of John Baptist dedicated to the Knight Templar. It is today the oldest part (the basilica) of the Great al-‘Umari Mosque in the centre of the old city of Gaza.

The present structure of the Greek Orthodox Church of Porphyrius was also rebuilt during this period, nevertheless on the foundations of a former one built during the Byzantine period.

In order to block the coastal road and prevent supplies and reinforcements reaching Ascalon from Egypt, the Crusaders built fortifications at the area of Deir al-Balah.

In July 1187 Salah al-Din defeated the Crusaders at Hittin near the lake of Tiberias. This defeat spelt the end of the Latin domination of Palestine.

At this point of time a lower town (al-Shuja‘iyya) began to grow up on the eastern foot of the mound of the old city of Gaza. A large number of Islamic historical buildings are still extant at the neighborhood.

Despite Beit Hanun is mentioned in the literature as an urban area, there are no archaeological evidences discovered yet at the area. The oldest structure still extant there is al-Nasr mosque (the victory mosque), which was built in 1239 close to the graves of ten Muslim martyrs fell died in a battle against the Crusaders.

11.2. A NEW PHASE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN GAZA REGION

During the Mamluk period (1250-1517) Gaza became the chief city of a district that for the most part belonged to the province of Damascus, though at times it was independent. The city enjoyed economic prosperity and possessed numerous public buildings28.

About 30 km to the south of Gaza, the Mamluk Emir Yunus Ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Nauruzi erected a caravanserai on the ancient rout leading from Cairo, the capital of the Mamluk sultanate, to Damascus. The building served as a post station and a commercial center and for goods exchange for the surrounding region. The building forms the core of the present day city of Khan Younus29.

The best visual evidence of the urban development of the city of Gaza during the Ottoman period is the city plan drafted by George Gatt in 1887, on which he located the most important governmental and private buildings. Large parts of the city walls and gates were still extant30.

27 Ibid.: 33-40
28 For more details on the entire Mamluk architecture of the city of Gaza see: Sadeq 1991.
29 For more details on the Khan see: Abu Khalaf 1983: pp 178-186
30 Gatt 1888: 149-159; see the republished map: Sadeq 1991.
11.3. THE URBAN PHASE OF DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT

Gaza remained under Turkish control until 1917, when it was captured by the British army under the leadership of Allenby and remained under British mandatory rule until 1948. During this period some scattered buildings were erected between the old city and the seashore in the al-Rimal neighborhood, named after the sand-dunes existed there in the way to the sea. The urban evolution here has been increased during the Egyptian administration (1948-1967), during which a new neighborhood, al-Nasr was established to the north west of the old city. Al-Nasir and al-Rimal neighborhoods are considered as the first urban extension of Gaza city during its modern history. Earlier ancient cities and villages and urban areas were developed during the 20th century. New Neighborhoods within the entire region of Gaza region were established. Since its occupation in 1967 the urban evolution of Gaza region was interrupted by 22 Israeli colonies erected illegally and not homogenously to interrupt the urbanism and urbanization sequence started since the 4th millennium BC.

CONCLUSION

Since the Neolithic period the fertile South-western Palestine attracted tribes to settle and create the earliest human sediments and later in the 4th millennium BC to establish villages and cities in the Mediterranean coastal zone and on mounds to the east of it as well as along Gaza valley and the ancient route connecting Egypt in the south with Canaan (Palestine), Syrian, Mesopotamia in the north and east.

As a matter of fact, the early urban evolution and development in Gaza region through its deep history is due to many factors. The location of Gaza on the ancient rout is a dominant factor facilitating interaction between early urban areas in Canaan/Palestine and other regions in Syria and Mesopotamia in the north and the Egypt in the south. The environmental diversity in Gaza region is a further basic factor for urban development and sustainable human life. The environmental potential of the Gaza region is variant; the sea and sand dunes in the west, mounds in the east, as well as fertile valley, and ground water.

Due to this location and environmental sitting, Gaza region possesses today a large number of archaeological sites dated to several historical phases. Their exploration since the late 19th century provides the scholars with plenty of visual evidences enabling them to layout and trace the urban development found during more than 6 thousands years, namely since Early Bronze Age, in the late 4th millennium BC down to the present day.

The archaeological urban remains; such as architecture and variant material culture made of stones, gold, bronze, silver, precious stones, pottery, shells and other material show the different urban life implications in the region in a continuous chronological sequence enabling also scholars to trace sequent topographical distribution of urban sediments through Ages. Chronologically ordered, the urban cities of the Bronze Age (3200-1200 BC) are located in the area between the most southern parts of Deir al-Balah to the city of Gaza in the north concentrating specifically along the valley of Gaza. The old city of Gaza seems to be at the same location since the Bronze Age too.

The next important historical phase of urban development in Gaza region was during the Roman-Byzantine period. Many villages in different sizes containing masonry buildings were constructed to the north and south of the city of Gaza. They were mentioned by contemporary historians like Sozomenus, Flavius Josephus, Strabo, and Marcus Diaconus. Furthermore the
Byzantine mosaic map discovered in Madaba (Jordan) also depicts some of these villages. The location of many of these villages were identified and excavated. The dramatic urban development during the Islamic period was mainly during the Mamluk (1250-1517) and Ottoman (1517-1917) periods. The walled city of Gaza and the surrounding area still have today a large number of historical buildings enable us to trace and evaluate the profile of an Islamic city during both of these two periods. The following dramatic urban evolution occurred during the 20th century. Earlier cities and villages were developed and expanded and new neighborhoods were constructed, nevertheless 22 Israeli colonies were established and expanded within Gaza region since its occupation in 1967 down to the present day.

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