

The Achaemenid Impacts On The Levantine Architecture During The Fifth And Fourth Centuries B.C.E.

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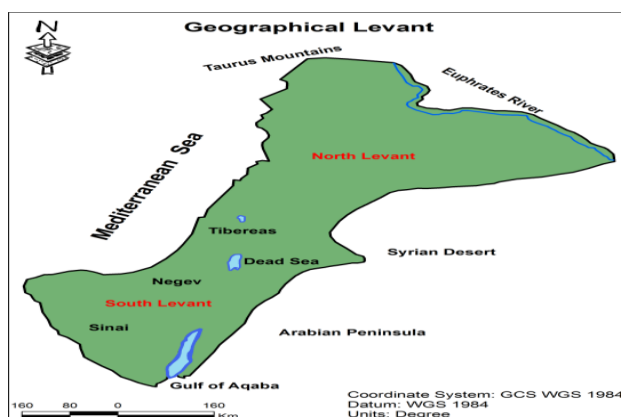
Abstract

The architectural remains give a direct expression of people's history in every age; explain the extent of their technological competence, traditions, culture, ideological levels, and their relations. The practice of architecture is used to accomplish both functional and emotional requirements, and thus, it serves both technical and artistic aims. Although these two aspects may be distinguished, they cannot be separated. During the Persian rule, the Levantines did not deny their ancestors' building techniques and methods they knew in the earlier periods, rather than they continued to employ them with or without modifications. The Persians were also known to hire Greek architects for constructing their monumental buildings. The architectural and decorative elements of the palatial buildings erected at the Achaemenid capitals have inspired the Levantine architects, specifically the Phoenicians in their northern colonies. This article describes the Achaemenid influences on the technique and art of designing of buildings in the Levant as distinguished from the skills associated with construction.

Keywords: Achaemenid Art; Architectural Ornaments; Building Techniques; Levant; Levantine Architecture; Persian Art.

1. Introduction

The Levant is a historical and geographical term referring to a vast area of the central territories of the Fertile Crescent to the east of the Mediterranean Sea comprising Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine nowadays. Geographically, Levant is approximately bounded on the north by the Taurus Mountains southern Turkey separating the Mediterranean coastal area of southern Turkey from the central Anatolian Plateau. On the south, it extends into the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea, and some definitions include the Sinai Peninsula as the southernmost boundary of the Levant and the author would adopt this saying. To the west, it is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea, and on the east it extends to the Euphrates River and Syrian Desert (in Arabic Bādiyat ash-Shām), which is located in the northern Arabian Peninsula, covering portions of southeast Syria, northeast Jordan, western Iraq and northern Arabia (Fig. 1).



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Figure 1: Map of geographical Levant (Prepared by Author)

As is known, the region located to the west of the Euphrates River was termed “Beyond the River” during the reign of the *Neo-Assyrians*, *Neo-Babylonians* and the Persians. In the fourth year of his reign, Cyrus II established what has come to be called “The United Satrapy” that included Babylonia and “Beyond the River” including Cyprus (Elayi and Sapin 1998: 16). The annals of Cyrus II declared that he received tributes from the kings of Phoenicia, who had fully recognized the Persian sovereignty over the world. Furthermore, ships of the Phoenician naval fleet supported the Persians during the war against Greece (Dandamaev 1989: 59-60). Nonetheless, all Phoenician cities maintained their independence and competed among themselves to penetrate new markets to control the economy and to dominate the southern coast of the Levant.

Some scholars assume that the capital of “Beyond the River” was Sidon taking into account its political reputation and prominence among the other Phoenician cities in addition to its critical role during the Persian-Greek wars. Furthermore, their principal idols Melqart, Eshmun, and Astarte have gained a wide acclaim, and people worshiped them all over the Levant, as evidently shown by the figurines and statues which have been discovered in many sites in this region.

Obviously, the Persian royal court deemed that it is in the empire’s interest to adopt a fresh approach that would be conducive to reconciliation with the Phoenicians rather than fomenting hostility and tension in the empire. The Persians knew the adverse implications of the wars have an impact upon every area of socio-economic development resources. Moreover, they were acutely aware of the importance of the profits from the Phoenician sea trade, and they are not willing to dissipate the state’s share of the imposed tribute to the empire's treasury. On the other hand, they would not allow forging a Phoenician-Grecian or Phoenico-Egyptian alliance that would threaten their security and sovereignty.

Reasonably, the Phoenician city-states had continued to call for the mobilization of the resources necessary for the implementation of the declaration on the right to development as well as for forgiveness of their heavy tribute at times of economic slowdown or recession caused by the Persian-Greek wars, which burdened their budgets and hampered their progress. These demands seemed to have been rejected, which has caused serious social and economic problems and ensuing revolutions broke out all over Phoenicia. A few years after the death of Artaxerxes III in 338 B.C.E., the Persian Empire started to crumble.

2. Architecture Typology

In the Persian period, the people knew and renovated several characteristics commonly seen in buildings and urban places based on identified needs, as appropriate and subject to available resources, and according to their correlation with various categories such as the geographical location, the significance of the site and its nature. As the author has stated above, although the Levantines have innovated new building methods and techniques and were impacted by several cultures as well, he would confine himself to the Achaemenid ones solely. The Levantine monumental podiums in the Persian period are imitating the Ziggurats of the *Neo-Sumerian* Dynasty at Ur south of Mesopotamia that were built during the Early Bronze Age. The Ziggurats were established in the form of flat rectangular platform, having the design of a terraced step pyramid of successively decreasing stories or levels.

In the northern territories of the Levant, there are only two temples topped Ziggurat-like structures are Eshmun Temple at Sidon and the temple of Byblos. The sanctuary area of Eshmun Temple contained a complex of structures dated to the *Neo-Babylonian*, Persian, Roman, and Byzantine periods. Temple of Eshmun was the most prominent structure in this complex. Only a few structures related to the temple were preserved, and the temple itself is no longer existed (Fig. 2). The sacred area of the temple consists of an esplanade and a grand open court limited by a huge limestone terrace wall supports a monumental podium that is facing north. The podium stands 22m-high, runs 50m into the hillside and occupied an area of 60m (east-west) × 40m (north-south). It was constructed of large solid limestone blocks measured 3m-long × 1m-thick × 1m-high (Dunand 1973: 11-12).

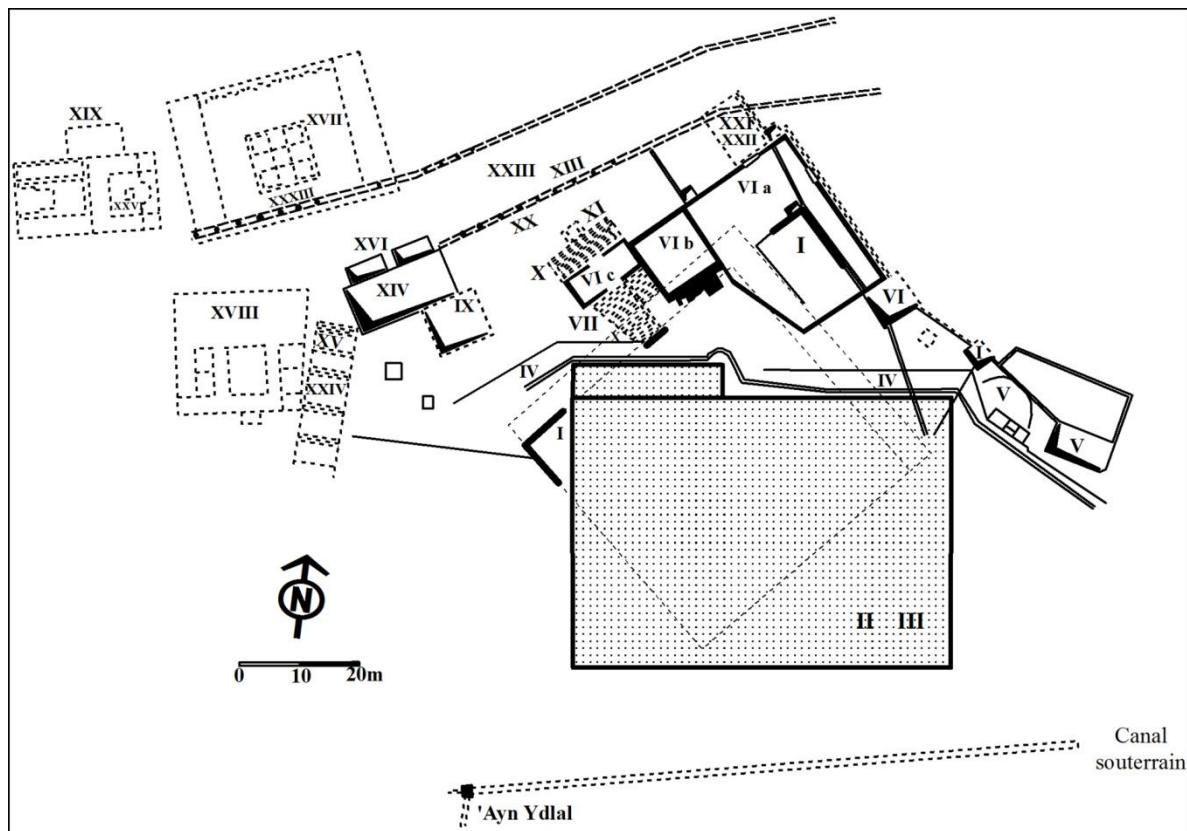


Figure 2: Plan of Eshmun Temple at Sidon (adapted from Dunand 1973: Fig. 1)

Two construction phases in the podium have been recognized. The first podium (no.I) had inclined, sharp-angled walls resembles the pyramids, constructed of well-cut stones, and associated with a rampart on the eastern side built of well-quarried stones as well (Fig. 3). This podium was established in the first half of the sixth century B.C.E. during the reign of Eshmun'azar i.e. under the *Neo*-Babylonian dominion, but the construction process did not accomplish and it has been collapsed very quickly except the northwest corner. The Sidonian king Bodashtart performed his ancestor's work and erected the second podium (nos.II-III) in the third quarter of the sixth century B.C.E. (530-500 B.C.E.) (Dunand 1973: 11).



Figure 3: The unaccomplished first podium of Temple of Eshmun at Sidon with rampart in the northwest corner of the second podium, looking southwest (Photo by Author)

The Persian complex at Byblos (Fig. 4) contains a grand podium (no.15) with two preserved protruding corner towers (nos.1 and 10), eight defensive towers (nos.2-9), a ramp (no.11), a retaining wall (no.16), and a restored temple topped the podium (no.12). The great podium measured 70×30 -40m, stands ca. 16m-high, and nowadays its surface is covered with grass and trees, which makes it difficult to observe traces of the temple that topped it. Only the eastern segment of the podium has been preserved.

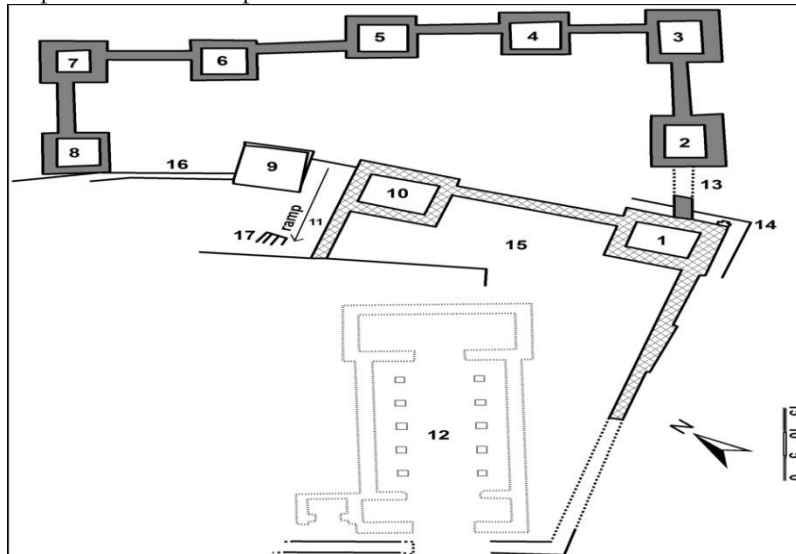


Figure 4: The layout of the Persian Complex at Byblos (adapted from Dunand 1969: 96)

The massive podiums at Sidon and Byblos recall the podium at Tall-i Takht (in English: throne hill) at the northeast end of Pasargadae in Iran, which probably dates to the reign of Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.E.) (Fig. 5) (Pierfrancesco Callieri: Personal Communication). The impressive western wall of this podium made of carefully carved stones similar to the stones of the podium of Eshmun Temple and the podium of the Persian Complex at Byblos. Too, they are comparable to the terraces of Masjid-i-Sulaiman in the Zagros Mountains southwest Iran and now dated to the fourth century B.C.E. (Dunand 1973: 11, 14).



Figure 5: The northwest corner of Cyrus' podium at Tall-i Takht at Pasargadae (Perrot 2013: Fig. 454)

As for the southern Levant, the Areas A and C Complexes in Buseirah south of Jordan, however, were built partially on stone platforms but are unequal to the podiums erected at Sidon and Byblos in terms of the quality of materials of construction, the elegance, and soaring high (cf. Bienkowski 2002: figs. 4.2, 4.6). The platform of Area A Complex which has been interpreted as a temple, however, was built of heavily fill deposits and stone walls. The central part of the Area C Complex was constructed on a stone "platform" stands to a height of 2.80m. The building as a whole represented a luxury residential structure, most likely a palace. The other Achaemenid impacts of the Levantine architecture typology is the column bases and drums. The Palace of Lachish (in Arabic *Tell ed-Duweir*) south

of Palestine, however, is the best example in this regard. It contains two main wings: northern and southern wings and a spacious open courtyard (Loc.P) measured $18 \times 18\text{m}$ in between. The court was surrounded by 30 various size rooms and halls on four sides. The crucial feature of the building is the two pillared porticoes at the entrances to the southern and western halls (Fig. 6).

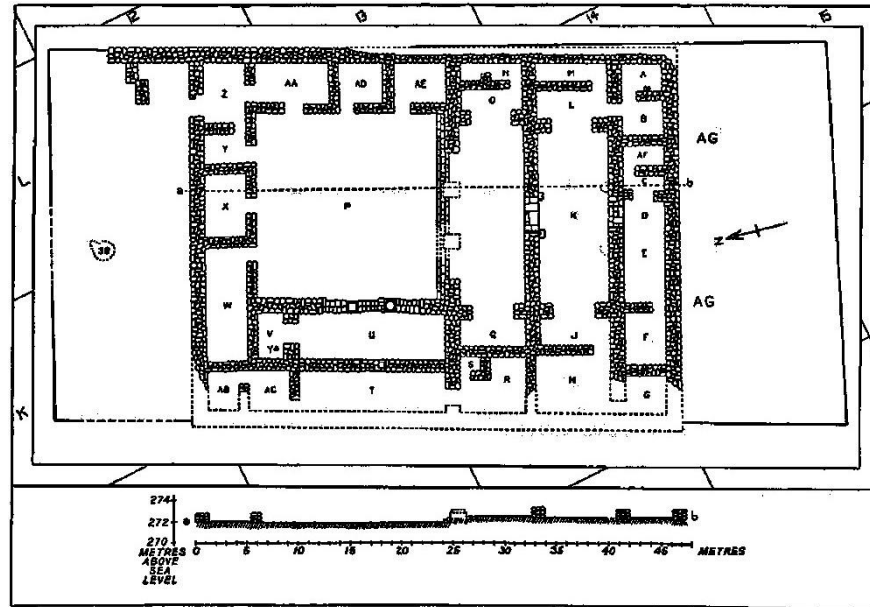


Figure 6: The Palace of Lachish (Tufnell 1953: Pl. 119)

The columns in front of the porticoes are well-quarried and standing on round bases above stepped square plinths (Fig. 7-8), with well-cut door sockets and thresholds.

In the author's view, the two-stepped stone-made square bases in front of the colonnaded porticoes which were topped by cylindrical columns with a circular torus base, however, is a Persian style found in the Achaemenid palaces such as the "Residential Palace" of Cyrus II at Pasargadae (Fig. 9) (cf. Schmidt 1951: fig. 8a-b). In the sanctuary area of Eshmun Temple in Sidon, the author has found similar smooth column bases in the sanctuary area still *in situ* (Fig. 10).



Figure 7: West and south porticoes of the Palace of Lachish with column basis in situ, looking southeast (Tufnell 1953: Pl. 22: 4)



Figure 8: Room U at the Palace of Lachish beyond the western portico, looking southwest (Tufnell 1953: Pl. 22: 6)



Figure 9: The columns of Pasargadae (Perrot 2013: Fig. 457)



Figure 10: Column bases of basalt still *in situ* near the podium of the Temple of Eshmun at Sidon (Photo by Author)

3. Architectural Ornaments

Only a few buildings in the Levant revealed pure Achaemenid influences on the architectural embellishments. These decorations were occasionally mixed with oriental and Greek influences. The bearded sphinxes wearing a flat hat that adorned the three-cornered Greek-type triangular facade of the Temple of Eshmun knew as the pediment, however, is a mixture sculpture art between the funeral sculptures of Greece and the architectural bas-reliefs of Persepolis (Fig. 11) (cf. Stucky and Mathys 2000: 138; fig. 10). In other words, Temple of Eshmun combines the form of the most familiar temples in Athens and the Achaemenid sculptures in Persepolis.

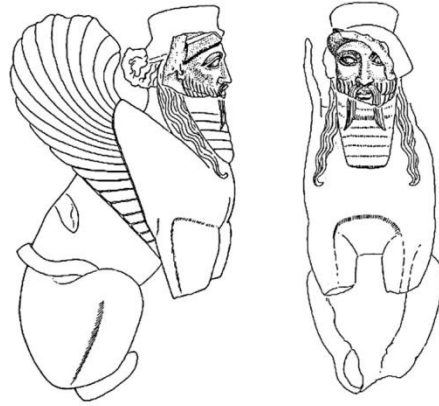


Figure 11: Sphinxes on the corners of the parapet of the Temple of Eshmun at Sidon (Stucky and Mathys 2000: 138; Fig. 10)

The protomes of bulls that adorned Eshmun Temple as bull-shaped capitals portrayed in crouched positions, however, are pure Achaemenid influences appeared for the first time in the Palaces of Darius I at Persepolis and Susa established in the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E. (Fig. 12) (cf. Schmidt 1951: Figs. 44d-e, 48b-c).



Figure 12: Column capital with four protomes of bulls at the Temple of Eshmun at Sidon (Stucky and Mathys 2000: 140; Fig. 12)

In Iran, there are dozens of such capitals carried by fluted shafts in the audience halls, knew as *Apadana* or the hypostyle where the king would greet visitors. They give a sense of the scale of the royal architecture of this dynasty and the power of the Persians. The capital shaped in the form of double-headed and kneeling bulls towering above the visitors and supported a very high wooden roof. The two bulls are attached to a single structure, with only the heads and the front part of the bodies doubled. The bulls show a high degree of accuracy. On the bulls has appeared patterning of the curls of the fur, especially on their breasts. They had elongated pointed horns, long and skillfully carved ears, hoofs and nostrils, elongated and thick necks, and the chin is unattached to the breast. Below the bulls is an additional capital and then below it would have been the shaft of the columns itself with a base (Fig. 13). In the Temple of Eshmun at Sidon the bulls' protomes had tiny and clumsy ears and hoofs, short spiral horns, hidden nostril, heads without necks, and the chin is stuck into the body with no any patterning (see Fig. 12).



Figure 13: The Louvre Museum showing bulls' capitals of the Palace of Darius at Susa topped an Ionic-type shaft with a wooden roof leaning against the necks of the bulls (Perrot 2013: Fig. 320)

The battlement friezes commonly called as pinnacles or stepped merlons with rectangular blocks resembles the teeth known as a “dentil frieze” beneath them are one of the most imported characteristic features of this period in the Levant. The merlons embellishing the eastern stairwell of the *Apadana* of the Palace of Darius I at Persepolis had four stepped right-angled steps each, equal in depth and high with a niche in the bottom center. This recess contained two successive and deep holes located directly under the last step at a high less than the second one (Fig. 14) (cf. Schmidt 1951: plate 26).



Figure 14: The merlons decoration on the eastern stairways of the *Apadana* of the Palace of Darius I at Persepolis (Schmidt 1951: Plate 26)

The merlons ornamenting the peak and the foot of the shrine of the temple of Amrit contained four stepped steps ascending at right angles each (Fig. 15). The steps have equal shallow depths and low heights. At the bottom of the steps there are two lateral niches instead of one in the center (Fig. 16). The merlons in the palace of Persepolis are separated by equal distances one from the other while the pinnacles in Amrit are attached. The pinnacles found on the ground of the remains of the temple of Tell Sukas on the northern coast of the Levant, however, contained three steps each and were of unequal depths and highs (Fig. 17) (cf. Riis 1979: 48, fig. 149).



Figure 15: The shrine (naos) in the centre of the “Ma’abed” of Amrit (Dunand and Saliby 1985: Pl. XXXI. 2-3)

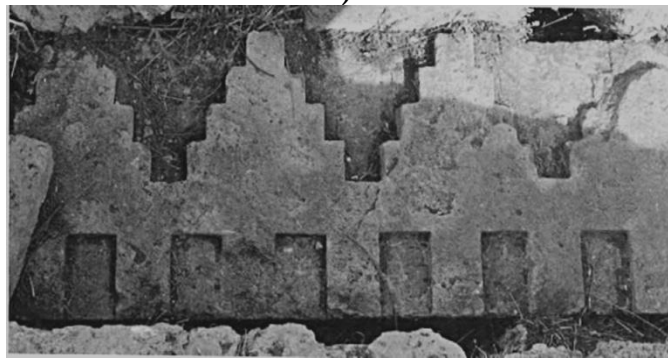


Figure 16: Battlements frieze with dentil at the “Ma’abed” of Amrit (Lembke 2004: Taf. 1: E)

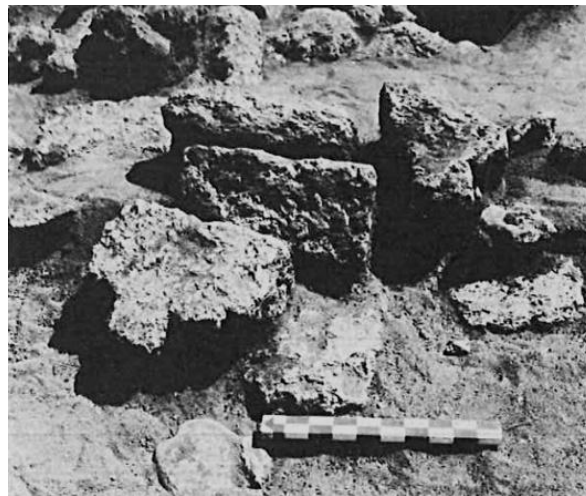


Figure 17: Fallen merlons (Loci.30 and 31) from the sanctuary of Tell Sukas (Riis 1979: 48; Fig. 149)

4. Historical and Archaeological Perspectives

Owing to its unique geographic location, the Levant has always been a point of contact between the Middle East and the external world, including Persia and it privileged the worldwide network of trade agreements, which both affected and was affected by several foreign cultures including the Egyptian, Greece, Hittite, and Mesopotamian ones. The Persians had not such strong cultural influence on the inhabitants of the Levant as the Egyptians had; perhaps they did not have the capacity to counteract and rid this part of their empire of the substantial impact of the Egyptian cultural presence which is rooted deeply in the history of the Levant since the Bronze Ages. Regardless, the palatial and luxurious palaces in Iran erected between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. and their ornaments, however, have inspired the architects in the Levant, who attempted, in turn, to absorb and imitate some of these elements based on the financial capacity and craftsmanship.

Obviously, no one of the buildings mentioned in the text shows the dazzling splendor and beauty of the Persian art and ornaments of the principal Achaemenid capitals Persepolis, Susa, and Pasargadae. The bulls' sculptures in the architecture of the Persian period in the Levant were not solely architectural or ornamental elements but also correlated to the religious beliefs. It is known to archaeologists that this iconography depicted the god Hadad- the supreme deity of the Phoenicians and Syrians since the first millennium B.C.E.

The Levant in the Persian period had witnessed a peaceful commingling of different cultures and religions and the fact that societies are becoming more diverse. The Achaemenid influence in the Levantines religious life was not completely absent. The stepped pinnacles and related religious connotations used by the Phoenicians in the sacred buildings are a direct Achaemenid impact, who are inspired, in turn, by their ancestors; the Elamites.

G. Garbini in a brief study dedicated to tracing the first appearance of the pinnacles in the ancient world, shed new lights on the root of this decorative and architectural design. His investigations showed that the first appearance of the stepped merlons was in the Elamite seal imprints that were found at Susa and dating back to ca. 3000 B.C.E. (Garbini 1958: 85-91). Garbini thinks that these pinnacles in the first time they appeared were neither conceived as an architectural element nor a decoration motif, but a religious conception indicates to a stairway to the heaven or a sacred mountain. These Elamite pinnacles had also four triangles steps. From Susa, this religious connotation began to spread all over the ancient world eastward and westward, including northern Syria when it was occupied by the Aramaeans in the late second and early first millennia B.C.E. The merlons decorations in the Levantine architecture during the Persian period, however, used as a decorative motif in the religious buildings, but the Persian architects implemented it in their luxurious palaces in Persepolis and Susa. Obviously, the Persian merlons were more elegant and detailed than the merlons in the Levant. It seemed that the craftsmen who performed the shrine of Amrit have introduced their innovation and style.

The barrel-vaulted roof, the pillared porticoes, the bathrooms associated with sewerage systems, and the lavish columns standing on circular bases above stepped square plinths in the Palace of Lachish, however, were the rarest elements in the Persian-period architecture in the Levant. It seems that the Levantines sought to imitate the massive palaces in Iran through adoption high-cost raw materials.

To sum up, the Persian effects on the Levantine architecture were at the lowest and confined to a few structures on the Phoenician coast specifically. The Achaemenid cultural influences that have appeared clearly on the Phoenician coast, however, did not exist to the same degree in the southern hinterland of the Levant. Indeed, the Achaemenid architectural influences in the southern Levant are negligible. This was due to the fact that the Phoenicians devoted themselves to the trade with the outside world, including Persia and the independence they obtained would have allowed them too much leeway and freedom of movement to establish trade colonies northward up to Al-Mina and southward at Tel Dor and Jaffa and perhaps further south, keeping in mind that they serve the interests of the Persian Empire. Therefore, they sought to emulate the Persian art in their monumental buildings. Whatever the case maybe, it was not unusual to find typical Phoenician architectural elements in many buildings in the southern Levant, in particular, those erected on the coast. The Phoenician stonemasons did so with foreknowledge and experience. This fact may be linked to the fact that many of these coastal sites were actually under the Sidonian and Tyrian hegemony during the Persian rule. The funerary epitaph of Eshmun'azar, King of Sidon, states that the Persian king awarded him Dor and Joppa (Jaffa), the mighty lands of grains in the Sharon Plain (Moscati 1973: 25). The Phoenician presence in that sites is well attested by using their construction techniques in various sites located along both the southern seashore and some inland sites such as Tell Deir 'Alla and Tell el-Mazar in the Jordan Valley and by the figurines depicted their goddesses as well.

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