Lod, Lydda, Diospolis

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Lod and Ramla – not Ramlod: On A Geographic Anomaly and the Longue Durée of Urban History

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לוד ורמלה ולא רמלוד: על אנומליה גיאוגרפית והמשך הארוך של ההיסטוריה העירונית

פרופ' נמרוד לוז

החוג ללימודי ארץ ישראל
המכללה האקדמית כנרת

اللد والرملة – وليس راملود: حول شذوذ جغرافي و«التاريخ الطويل» في التاريخ الحضري

البروفيسور نمرود لوز

قسم دراسات أرض إسرائيل
كلية كينيرت الأكاديمية

Abstract

The excellent location and placement of Lod made it an important and central city in the region throughout its long history. At the end of the Byzantine period, Lod, under its Roman name Diospolis, was a central city in Palaestina Prima. However, this status changed with the establishment of Ramla by Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik as the district capital. Sulayman's original plan was to create Ramla as an urban alternative to Lod and to lead to its destruction. This plan did not fully succeed, and from the early eighth century CE, these two cities coexisted in close proximity. Contrary to all familiar principles of urban geography, they neither merged, contained one another, nor did one eliminate the other. This article focuses on this urban anomaly through a discussion of the transformations in Lod's status since the Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE. First, it examines the processes that occurred following the Muslim conquest and the formation of a new administrative perception regarding the location of the capital of the district of Filastin. Next, it presents historical traditions found in Muslim sources regarding the establishment of Ramla as part of a plan intended to overshadow Lod as the older metropolitan center. The third section of the discussion is devoted to analyzing the long-term implications of Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik's initiative on Lod's urban history, in the context of comparable urban phenomena. The article concludes by reconsidering whether this case indeed constitutes a settlement anomaly, and, if so, what its implications are for Lod when observed through the longue durée of regional urban history.

תקציר

גורמי האיתור והמיקום המשובחים של לוד הפכו אותה לאורך ההיסטוריה הארוכה שלה לעיר חשובה ומרכזית באזור. בשלהי התקופה הביזנטית הייתה לוד, ובשמה הרומי דיוספוליס, עיר מרכזית בפלסטינה פרימה. אך מצב זה השתנה לאחר הקמתה של רמלה על ידי סלימאן בן עבד אל־מלכ כבירת המחוז. תוכניתו המקורית של סלימאן הייתה לייצר את רמלה כאלטרנטיבה עירונית ללוד ולהוביל להחרבתה, אך תוכנית זו לא צלחה באופן מלא, ומראשית המאה השמינית לסה"נ מתקיימות שתי ערים אלה בסמיכות קרובה, ובניגוד לכל היגיון גיאוגרפי־עירוני מוכר הן אינן מתאחדות, מכילות זו את זו או שהאחת מעלימה את רעותה. מאמר זה מבקש לעסוק באנומליה עירונית זו דרך דיון בתמורות במצבה של לוד מאז הכיבוש המוסלמי במאה השביעית לסה"נ. בתחילה יידונו התהליכים שהתרחשו בעקבות הכיבוש המוסלמי וגיבושה של תפיסה מנהלית חדשה ביחס למיקום בירת מחוז פלסטין. לאחר מכן תוצגנה מסורות היסטוריות המופיעות במקורות המוסלמיים להקמתה של רמלה כחלק ממהלך שנועד להעלים את לוד כמרכז המטרופוליני הוותיק. חלקו השלישי של הדיון יוקדש לניתוח ההשלכות ארוכות הטווח של מפעלו של סלימאן בן עבד אל־מלכ על ההיסטוריה האורבנית של לוד, על רקע מקבילות אורבניות דומות. בסיומו של המאמר נשוב ונשאל, האם אכן באנומליה יישובית מדובר ואם כן, מה הן השלכותיה על לוד כאשר מתבוננים במשך הארוך של ההיסטוריה היישובית האזורית.

ملخص

كان الموقع الجغرافي المتميز للُّد من أهم العوامل التي جعلتها مدينة مزدهرة ومركزية على امتداد تاريخها الطويل. ففي أواخر الفترة البيزنطية، عُرفت اللد باسمها الروماني «ديوسبوليس»، وكانت مدينة مركزية في فلسطين الأولى عشية الفتح الإسلامي في القرن السابع الميلادي. غير أن هذا الوضع شهد تحولًا جذريًا عقب إنشاء مدينة الرملة بأمر الخليفة الأموي سليمان بن عبد الملك لتكون عاصمة إقليمية جديدة ضمن جند فلسطين. وقد هدفت خطته الأصلية إلى إقامة الرملة بوصفها بديلًا حضريًا للُّد، بحيث يتفوق مركزها على حساب المركز الحضري المجاور، ويؤدي في نهاية المطاف إلى تراجع مكانة اللد ورمبا زوالها. إلا أن هذه الخطة لم تتحقق بصورة كاملة؛ فمنذ مطلع القرن الثامن الميلادي تتجاور المدينتان في نطاق جغرافي محدود، وعلى خلاف كل منطق حضري مألوف لا تندمج إحداهما بالأخرى، ولا تستوعبها، ولا تقضي عليها. تتناول هذه الدراسة هذا الشذوذ الحضري من خلال تحليل التحولات التي طرأت على مكانة اللد منذ الفتح الإسلامي. في البداية، تُناقش التغيرات التي أعقبت الفتح الإسلامي وتبلور تصور إداري جديد بشأن موقع عاصمة جند فلسطين. ثم تُعرض الروايات التاريخية الإسلامية المتعلقة بتأسيس الرملة بوصفه جزءًا من مشروع استهدف إضعاف اللد كمركز متروبوليتاني قديم. وفي القسم الثالث، يُحلَّل الأثر طويل المدى لمبادرة سليمان بن عبد الملك على التاريخ الحضري للُّد في ضوء حالات حضرية موازية. وتختتم الدراسة بطرح تساؤل حول ما إذا كان هذا الواقع يمثل بالفعل شذوذًا استيطانيًا، وما دلالاته عند النظر إليه في إطار المدى الطويل للتاريخ الإقليمي.

Introduction: A Look from the End, Back to the Beginning

The website of the Lod Municipality features a concise—albeit somewhat puzzling— analysis by the current mayor, attorney Yair Revivo, regarding the long duration of Lod's urban geography from its beginning to the present day:

> Lod has over 5,000 years of history. Its unique location in the center of the Land of Israel attracted our biblical forefathers. Throughout history, a succession of Christian and Muslim rulers governed it, with the Turkish sultans leaving behind an abundance of scattered architectural relics. Lod returned to Jewish hands during the War of Independence, when Commando Unit 89, under the command of Moshe Dayan, liberated it during Operation Danny. The central location of Lod, near Israel's aerial gateway, is further emphasized by the system of roads and interchanges that have shortened distances and travel times: only 10 minutes' drive from Lod to Tel Aviv, and about 30 minutes to Jerusalem (Revivo 2014).

In the above and high-level Braudelian[1] description of the long duration (*longue durée*) of urban history, the centrality and geographical accessibility of Lod are highlighted as a core reason for its existence as an important city throughout significant parts of its past. This is certainly so in relation to its adjacent metropolitan area and the administrative district to which it belonged.

Starting in 48 BCE, Lod served as the central city in the eponymous toparchy. Around 200 CE, during the time of Septimius Severus (187–211 CE), the city received imperial endorsement for its regional status and became known as the Roman colony of Diospolis, or by its full name: *Colonia Lucia Septimia Severa Diospolis* (Oppenheimer 1988). During the Byzantine period, the city was not the capital of its district (Palaestina Prima), an administrative status reserved for Caesarea Maritima, yet it succeeded in maintaining its position as a central and important city. This is well reflected in the way it is presented on the Madaba Map, dated to approximately 570 CE, as a large city and the permanent seat of a bishop, a fact that attests to its centrality in the Christian administrative hierarchy (Avi-Yonah 1953; Fedalto 1988; Ashkenazi 2009). The Muslim conquest in the fourth decade of the seventh century CE did not lead to fundamental changes in the city's importance within its district, nor in its economic or Christian-religious centrality. The city, at least in the first decades after the conquest, became the capital of the new Muslim district, *Jund Filastin* (Tabari 1885). The dramatic change in the urban status of Lod, and its metropolitan centrality within its district, occurred as a result of the establishment of a new city around 700 CE—the city of Ramla, which was founded by the district governor Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik, to serve as the capital of the district of Filastin (Luz 1996). The distance from Lod, the old city of Diospolis, to the center of the new city of Ramla is less than two kilometers. In the shadow of this forced proximity, Lod found itself, starting in the eighth century, in a unique urban anomaly where two urban centers exist that do not merge, contain, or include one another, nor does one succeed in eliminating the other. Ramla was indeed the city that replaced Lod as the central city within the boundaries of the district they shared, but despite the considerable challenges it posed to the older city, it failed to destroy, contain, or unite with it.

This article aims to explore the unique urban history of Lod by examining the transformations it underwent following the Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE and up to the present day. I begin by outlining the geographical-theoretical framework concerning the spatial distribution of cities, drawing on central-place theory (CPT), to highlight the urban distinctiveness of Lod and its neighboring city, Ramla. I then examine the processes that unfolded in Lod after the conquest, particularly the establishment of a new administrative framework under Muslim rule regarding the location of the provincial capital of Palestine. This is followed by a discussion of historical accounts in Muslim sources, which portray the founding of Ramla as part of a deliberate effort to replace and supplant Lod as the region's longstanding metropolitan

1 Fernand Braudel was a prominent French historian of the Annales School and Total History, who emphasized in his works longue durée as a fundamental criterion for understanding historical processes. See Braudel, F. 1949. The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II. Paris (in French).

center. The fourth section analyzes the long-term impact of Sulayman ibn ʻAbd al-Malik's urban initiatives on the development of Lod. Finally, the article addresses this unusual settlement pattern, in which two cities have coexisted side by side to the present day, in light of broader urban parallels and markedly different developmental trajectories. The central objective of this study is to underscore Lod's urban uniqueness and to examine the enduring urban challenges it has faced since the rise of Ramla.

Lod-Ramla and Central-Place Theory

"Every farm gate opens onto a dirt road, and this road leads to a larger village, and from there to an even larger village or city" (Kolb, Bruner, and Ogburn 1940). This analysis of the development of the settlement system in a rural area of the United States in the early twentieth century clearly illustrates the practical, economic-spatial-functional logic that shapes the organic growth of any settlement pattern. Indeed, hierarchical settlement systems, encompassing a range of settlements from the smallest hamlets (or, in Hebrew terminology, *kfarir*) to vast urban agglomerations (megalopolises), are found in every place and historical period where market forces and geography operated unimpeded, in accordance with the carrying capacity of the region.

Settlement systems develop in a hierarchical model, within which ranking is based on population size and the functions performed by each settlement. Efforts to identify and model this regularity, and to formulate models of hierarchical settlement development, have long engaged scholars in both geography and sociology (Hagget 1977). In this context, central-place theory is particularly significant, as it seeks to explain the location, size, and relative influence of settlements based on the economic logic of the commercial activities that occur there and the services they provide (Christaller 1966).

The theory rests on two fundamental assumptions:

1. Each settlement or city has a threshold for goods. The larger the settlement, the higher its goods threshold. The threshold represents the distance a consumer is willing to travel to acquire a product, and accordingly, for unique or specialized goods, the consumer will travel a greater distance.
2. Within the sphere of influence of a large city, there will be no other city of comparable size due to insufficient economic conditions.

These assumptions refer to a flat, obstacle-free area where fertile land is equally available for agriculture across the region. Under such conditions, Christaller argues, a hierarchical network of settlements and central places will develop. The logic behind such a hierarchy of central places is that a city requires a minimum hinterland to sustain it, which itself contains a hierarchy of settlements. In this way, urban centers are sustained by surrounding rural settlements, providing services to the district they serve.

The hierarchical structure of the settlement system can be modified or adapted locally in response to specific conditions, such as topographical constraints like mountain ranges, or the presence of a significant water source that can sustain a larger population, as well as political transformations and historical contingencies such as the establishment of boundaries between political jurisdictions. In the present case, the creation of a new urban entity adjacent to an existing one occurred due to political or declarative needs, rather than as part of the "natural" growth of the settlement. Analysis of the settlement map of the district of Diospolis, *Palaestina Prima*, illustrates development largely dependent on physical terrain and geo-economic conditions—in other words, the carrying capacity of the land. Under such circumstances, according to Christaller's framework, a hierarchical system of settlements emerges, including a ranking among them, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

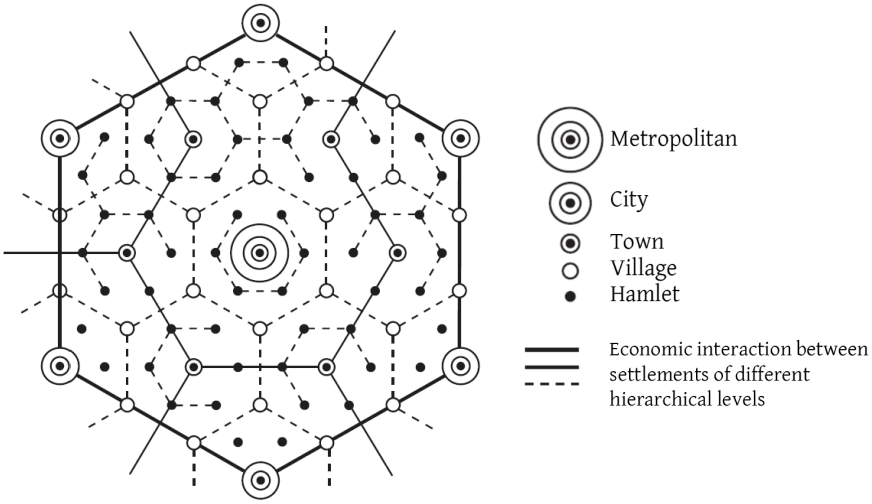

Fig. 1: Diagram of Christaller's Central Place Theory. My thanks to Ms. Nava Mosko for preparing this hand-crafted illustration.

At the center of the illustration is the primary city of the region. At equal intervals from it, and at the greatest distance, the second-tier cities develop. Around each of these cities, a corresponding hierarchical system emerges, in which the settlements of the tier immediately below are positioned at the edge of their sphere of influence, and so on down to the smallest settlement unit, the Hamlet. This arrangement clearly explains why it is unlikely for two primary cities–whose service networks are similar in size and regional influence–to develop in close proximity. If we accept that settlements grow evolutionarily and expand as they become more significant in terms of the economic activities conducted within them, it follows naturally that an established central place will prevent the emergence of another center of equal size within its economic sphere of influence.

Such organic growth can be observed in the settlement distribution map of *Palaestina Prima* in the late Byzantine period. This map (Fig. 2) presents an urban hierarchy in which small, medium, and large cities are positioned at fairly regular intervals (Broshi 1982). Among the large cities, specific spacing is maintained, well explained by the rules of central-place theory discussed above. Broshi, who presents this map, notes that in the territory of first-century Palestine, due to its uniqueness and its significance to Byzantine administration and its various needs, there were more cities than could be anticipated solely based on the carrying capacity of the land (Broshi 1982: 450). According to him, this resulted from political and cultural decisions rather than economic variables. Even accepting this analysis, however, no two large cities of similar size are found adjacent to each other, even in densely urbanized *Palaestina Prima*. This phenomenon, as defined in this discussion, represents an anomaly, the causes of which do not lie, as noted, in the organic development of the settlement hierarchy. This was the situation the Muslims faced during their conquest of the Land of Israel in the fourth decade of the seventh century CE. From then on, as a new authority with different needs and perspectives from its Byzantine predecessor took control, administrative developments occurred that led to changes in the regional urban landscape, including the size, importance, and certainly the urban history of the cities. Into this reality, already dense with urban settlements, a new city named Ramla was introduced in very close proximity to Lod. Its establishment at this location was necessarily an addition that was not required to meet the needs of the local population, and, as I argue in this article, it marked the beginning of an urban anomaly for two main reasons: First, it was imposed on an already densely settled area adjacent to an existing city; second, it created the parallel existence of two neighboring urban centers from the eighth century to the present, mutually constraining and limiting each other.

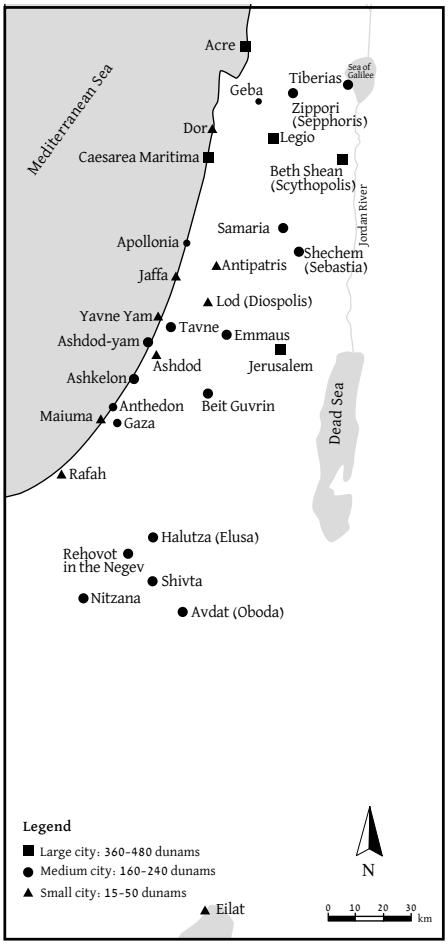

Fig. 2: Urban hierarchy map

From Diospolis to Lod – Administrative Transformations in the Early Muslim Rule of the Region

The Muslim conquest of the Land of Israel in the fourth decade of the seventh century CE did not immediately lead to fundamental changes in the administration of the region. These changes occurred gradually throughout the Rashidun period (632–660) and became more pronounced during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685–705) (Hawting 1987). Nevertheless, a notable transformation occurring in close proximity to the Muslim entry into the region was the reorganization of the Byzantine provinces according to the Muslim *ajnad* system (*ajnad* being the plural of *jund*, meaning a district or, more precisely, an administrative unit intended to sustain the Muslim army stationed within it). The division of Syria into districts is already attributed to the reign of the first caliph, Abu Bakr (632–634). In this context, the Muslims transitioned from the tripartite division of *Palaestina Prima*, *Secunda*, and *Tertia* to a two-district system: *Jund al-Urdunn* and *Jund Filastin* (Sourdel 1981).

Diospolis was conquered by ʻAmr ibn al-ʻAs following the Battle of Ajnadayn (634) as part of the Muslim campaign in southern Palestine (al-Baladhuri 1866). According to the tradition recorded by the leading historian of the period, Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, the city surrendered to the Muslim conqueror in the 15th year of the Hijra, i.e., 636 CE (al-Tabari 1885: 2406–2407). According to this account, the city was handed over to ʻAmr without military resistance (*sulah*), through a peace agreement (*aman*) signed by the city's notables, headed by the bishop, with the Muslim military commander. The treaty guaranteed

the residents numerous rights, including the protection of life and property, freedom of worship, and the continued existence of pre-Islamic religious institutions, in exchange for paying taxes and recognizing the authority of the caliph.

One immediate change was the reversion to the city's original Semitic name, Lod, which appears under this name in all Muslim sources available to us from the time of the conquest to the present.

Another notable change in the administration of the province of Palestine in the post-conquest period concerned the location of its capital. Throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods, Caesarea had maintained its status as the principal city and the capital of *Palaestina Prima* (Dan 1984). At the outset of the conquests, Emmaus (*Amaous Nicopolis*) served as the temporary capital of the new province (Luz 2000). In 639 CE, following a severe plague that struck the Muslim army in the region and the simultaneous conquest of all provincial cities by 640 CE, a reassessment of the provincial capital's location became necessary. Although the early caliphs were engaged in the restoration of coastal cities in Syria and Palestine, this did not result in the selection of Caesarea as the capital of the new province (Elad 1978).

The non-selection of Caesarea is unsurprising, as Muslim rule generally preferred inland cities, situated at a distance from the coast (Kennedy 1986). It is possible that fears of Byzantine naval attacks influenced this administrative perspective, which was based on the operational limitations of a government reliant on land forces (the Muslim caliphate) in confronting an enemy with maritime supremacy (the Byzantine Empire). For example, during the conquest of Egypt, the Muslim commander ʻAmr ibn al-ʻAs sent a letter to Caliph Umar requesting approval to continue the conquest from Alexandria, which had just been captured. Umar's response was unequivocal: do not station Muslims where a sea lies between you and them (al-Masʻudi 1894: 358). He was referring to the Nile, which separated Alexandria from his seat of authority on the Arabian Peninsula at the time. ʻAmr obeyed and established his capital at Fustat, near which Cairo was later founded by the Fatimid caliphate. Cairo eventually became the principal city of Egypt; a role Alexandria had held for over a millennium.

In the scholarly literature, it has been established that Lod served as the temporary provincial capital until the founding of Ramla (Le Strange 1890; Sharon 1986). For instance, Gil (1983) emphasizes that despite the significant investments of the Umayyad caliphs in Jerusalem, the city did not become the provincial capital, a status that was only established with the founding of Ramla at the beginning of the eighth century. According to Gil, Jerusalem's importance was solely religious, and it did not function as an administrative center under Muslim rule. This position is contested in Elad's study, which presents extensive evidence indicating that the Umayyad activities in the Jerusalem region aimed to enhance both the city's religious and political standing (Elad 1995).

The main challenge in identifying Jerusalem as the provincial capital is the absence of a clear text explicitly stating that it held such a status. Accordingly, the ambiguity in the research is also linked to the Muslim sources of the period or to the thereof that specify the identity of the provincial capital during the seventh century CE. Here, I wish to show that after Emmaus ceased to serve as the temporary capital, the province was, at least for a period of time, administered from two centers simultaneously—Jerusalem and Lod—until the establishment of Ramla. If this assertion is correct, it provides important insights into the status of Lod after the conquest and sheds light on issues concerning the location of the capital of *Jund Filastin* prior to the founding of Ramla.

In his account of the conquest of Jerusalem, al-Tabari presents the following sequence of events:

> From Salim, who said: When ʻUmar [ibn al-Khattab] arrived in al-Sham, he encountered a Jewish man from Damascus who said to him: "Peace be upon you, Faruq [ʻUmar's epithet]. You are the ruler of Iliya [Jerusalem], and by God, you will not return until God grants you Jerusalem [i.e., until you conquer it]." The people of Jerusalem inflicted harm on ʻAmr [ibn al-ʻAs], and he retaliated against them, but he could not capture Jerusalem or Ramla. When ʻUmar [ibn al-Khattab] camped at al-Jabiya [his headquarters in the Golan region]… the people of Jerusalem came to him and requested that he grant them, in writing, a peace agreement for Jerusalem and its surroundings, as well as for Ramla and its surroundings. Palestine was divided into two parts: one with the people of Jerusalem and one with the people of Ramla, and Jund Filastin was subdivided into ten districts (al-Tabari 1885: 2403).

The picture presented here concerns the introduction of Muslim administration into the territory *of Palaestina Prima*. While ʻUmar was stationed at his headquarters in al-Jabiya in the Golan Heights, representatives from Jerusalem arrived to request a peace agreement with him. ʻUmar divided the province into two administrative sectors from which the Muslims would govern the newly established *Jund Filastin*: Jerusalem and Ramla. It is clear that this does not constitute historical evidence for the existence of Ramla in 636 CE at the time these peace agreements were signed; rather, it reflects either a scribal error or a historical anachronism in which the ninth-century historian attributes the status of provincial capital to Ramla prior to its foundation by Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik around 700 CE.

In another tradition recorded in the same source, transmitted by Salim ibn ʻAbdallah ibn ʻUmar ibn al-Khattab, the detailed formulations of the agreements pertain to Jerusalem and Lod—not Jerusalem and Ramla. Al-Tabari subsequently notes that all other cities of Palestine received a treaty identical to that granted to Lod. From this discussion, it becomes clear which cities al-Tabari considered central in the province following the Muslim conquest. After the signing of the peace agreements, Caliph ʻUmar dispatched an army to Palestine and appointed two governors: ʻAlqama ibn al-Hakam was assigned to one half of Palestine, with his seat in Ramla (which, as I contend, should be read as Lod), and ʻAlqama ibn al-Mughira was assigned to the other half, with his seat in Jerusalem. Al-Tabari reports, in another tradition transmitted by the same Salim ibn ʻAbdallah (the grandson of Caliph ʻUmar): "'Umar appointed ʻAlqama ibn al-Mughira as governor over Jerusalem and ʻAlqama ibn al-Hakam as governor over Ramla. ʻUmar placed the soldiers who had been with ʻAmr [ibn al-ʻAs] under their command and instructed ʻAmr to join him at al-Jabiya" (al-Tabari 1885: 2407).

Why, then, does Ramla appear in the tradition transmitted by Salim ibn ʻAbdallah as existing already at the outset of the Muslim conquest? In al-Tabari's various accounts, sometimes Ramla is mentioned and sometimes Lod, yet from the context it is clear that both refer to the same city. The peace agreements were signed, as noted, with Jerusalem and Lod. The two governors appointed by Caliph ʻUmar were assigned to Jerusalem and Ramla. The confusion between the cities is problematic, particularly since the transmitters of these traditions lived in Palestine at a time when Ramla had already been established and presumably knew the province well. Salim ibn ʻAbdallah, the transmitter of the knowledge concerning the two governors in Palestine, was a renowned *muhaddith* (transmitter of tradition), who died in 105 AH (723 CE) or possibly 106 AH (724 CE) (Ibn ʻAsakir 1984: 190–194). Whether his death occurred in 723 or 724 CE, it is clear that he was aware of the foundation of Ramla by Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik and, as a resident of the province, could distinguish between Lod and Ramla.

Why, then, does Ramla appear in his account of the time of the conquest? The most plausible explanation is a scribal error introduced when the tradition was recorded in the early eighth century and subsequently compiled by al-Tabari about a century later. Another possibility is that Salim projected a situation familiar to him—namely, the existence of two parallel administrative centers after the conquest, which I contend were Lod and Jerusalem—onto the earlier period. Knowing of this temporary administrative division prior to the foundation of Ramla, Salim may have inadvertently confused Ramla with Lod in his account. In any case, my contention is that in the passages cited above, Lod should be read wherever Ramla is mentioned.

The importance of these traditions, based on early transmitters from the early eighth century CE, lies in the administrative picture they convey: The province of Palestine maintained two governing centers (temporary capitals) prior to the establishment of Ramla; Lod and Jerusalem. Each center was headed by a military governor with part of the Muslim army of *Jund Filastin* under his command. The initial administrative ambiguity following the conquest, or the gradual development of a coherent administrative concept culminating in the selection of a single provincial capital, is not unique to Palestine. A similar case of twin capitals within the same province occurred in Iraq following the Muslim conquest. During the governorship of Ziyad ibn Abihi in Iraq, the region had two subordinate capitals, Kufa and Basra. These two principal cities functioned as twin capitals of Iraq until the reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik (685–705), when the province was reorganized and Wasit was established as the new capital (Morony 1984).

The existence of two parallel administrative centers in Palestine helps explain the scholarly debate regarding the provincial capital prior to the founding of Ramla. The view that Lod served as the administrative capital relies on sources explicitly stating this. The perspective promoting Jerusalem's role as the capital is based on archaeological evidence and the city's unique status under Umayyad rule, interpreted as proof of its administrative function at some point during the seventh century CE. Lod, as a central city in its province, located at a major crossroads—the north–south route from Damascus to Egypt and the east–west route from Jaffa to Jerusalem—was well suited to the needs of the region's new rulers. It is difficult to determine when exactly this administrative division began or whether it persisted throughout the early post-conquest period, but it is clear that it concluded with the founding of Ramla as the provincial capital during the governorship of Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik. The introduction of Muslim rule into the region led to a different administrative dynamic from that of the preceding Byzantine period. Lod's centrality and its position at the intersection of key inland routes served the needs of the new rulers more effectively than the previous provincial capital, Caesarea. During the first decades of Muslim rule, one can discern both a deliberation and the gradual formation of a new administrative conception, which culminated with the appointment of Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik as governor of Palestine.

The Establishment of Ramla as an Urban Nemesis to Lod

There are several versions regarding the appointment of Sulayman as governor of the province, with the main difference among them being the date of his appointment. In the version I present here, the appointment is attributed to the period of his father's caliphate, that is, between 685 and 705 CE. In a version recorded by Ibn al-Faqih al-Madani (903 CE), the appointment is dated to the early reign of his brother al-Walid as caliph, around 705 CE:

> When al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik came to power, he appointed Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik over the province of Palestine. He resided in Lod and then built Ramla as a [new] city (Ibn al-Faqih 1885: 102).

Elsewhere I have discussed at length the reasons and circumstances surrounding the foundation of Ramla (Luz 1996). Here, I will focus only on aspects relevant to understanding the situation of Lod and the effects of this urban innovation—Ramla—on the older city nearby. Al-Jahshiyari provides a detailed account of the factors that led Sulayman to establish Ramla and the connection between the founding of the new city and the decline of the older, central city in the region:

> There was a man from Palestine known as Ibn Batrik who wrote to [Sulayman] and advised him to build Ramla. The reason for this was that Ibn Batrik had asked the people of Lod to grant him a plot of land adjacent to the church to build a house. When they refused, he swore by God that he would destroy it, that is, the church. Then Sulayman, the Commander of the Faithful, thought: 'Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and al-Walid built the mosque in Damascus, and they became renowned. If I build a mosque and a city and relocate people to it [and thereby gain renown], I will also be known.' He built the city of Ramla and its mosque, and this was the cause of the destruction of Lod (al-Jahshiyari 1938: 48).

The Ibn Batrik mentioned in this tradition was a senior official in Sulayman's administration (al-Baladhuri 1866: 143). This tradition, attested in several sources, portrays a conflict between the new administration and the old aristocracy of Lod as a central motive for establishing a competing urban center, which led to the decline and eventual disappearance of the older center. Notably, if there is any historical basis for this story, the new governor resolved the conflict in accordance with the rules of *aman* (protection) and did not destroy the church, but rather created a new administrative and urban space where he could act freely, without legal constraints. In this context, the establishment of Ramla is presented as part of a process intended to diminish, weaken, and even supplant Lod.

In a rare and compelling tradition recorded by Ibn Fadhlallah al-'Umari (1349 CE), a different sequence of events is described, yet it similarly highlights the tension and antagonism between the Muslim administration

and the old Christian elites as a basis for founding the new city (al-'Umari 1923: 146–148). According to this account, Sulayman was appointed governor of Palestine by his father Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, while still a young man. Due to his youth and inexperience, he was assigned an advisor, Rajaa ibn Haywah, a key figure in Umayyad administration in Syria, known among other duties for overseeing construction projects in Jerusalem on behalf of Abd al-Malik (Bosworth 1972).

At the outset of Sulayman's governorship, his capital was Lod. Near the city's central church was a beautiful garden in which Sulayman enjoyed spending time. One day, his advisor Rajaa sought to purchase the garden for him. The garden apparently belonged to the bishop of Lod. Rajaa approached the bishop with an offer to buy the land. Although the bishop verbally agreed, he used a clever legal maneuver, in the presence of witnesses, to designate the area as a *waqf*, thereby preventing any legal sale. Sulayman's youthful anger was inflamed when he realized that the bishop had outwitted him, and he resolved to kill the church official. Rajaa, however, calmed him and distracted him by suggesting a long horseback ride. As they left Lod, they came upon a tent situated on a flat plain where, according to al-'Umari, the White Mosque of Ramla would later be built. Because it was a hot day, they sought shelter in the tent and encountered a noblewoman whose dignity and prestige softened Sulayman's anger. Observing the surrounding landscape—fertile with fruit trees and numerous estates—Rajaa suggested to Sulayman that a city could be founded there, superior to Lod. Since the city was destined to become large and significant, he advised Sulayman to build a large mosque and a magnificent governor's residence. Sulayman requested permission to demolish the church in Lod, but Rajaa prevented him from doing so. The city was named after the remarkable woman Sulayman had met that day—Ramla.

In this account, which intertwines literary and fictional motifs, the founding of the new city Ramla is clearly depicted as a form of revenge and a means to challenge—and potentially destroy—the recalcitrant city of Lod, whose inhabitants had successfully resisted full control by the Muslim governor. A central motive for establishing Ramla was the limitations on the Muslim administration's ability to act freely within the older urban space, as noted above, and the need to create a territory free from preexisting property claims and other obstructive factors. In this sense, Ramla was conceived as a nemesis—that is, as a perpetual rival of Lod, potentially leading to its ultimate destruction. As I will demonstrate below, urban rivalry indeed existed from the founding of Ramla to the present, although the new city did not succeed in erasing its predecessor. The consequences of this development will be examined through a longitudinal study of Lod's urban history from the time of Sulayman to the present.

Lod After the Founding of Ramla: The Long Continuum of Urban Decline

On the eve of the Muslim conquest, Lod was an important urban center in *Palaestina Prima*. Throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods, the city served as the center of a fertile agricultural region, which included numerous villages and towns as part of its rural hinterland (Schwartz 1991). This situation persisted into the early Islamic period until the founding of Ramla. Following the establishment of Ramla and the substantial resources invested by the Umayyad administration in its development, a new phase in Lod's history began. Broadly speaking, from the early eighth century CE until the modern period, Lod became subsidiary and marginal to Ramla, often described merely as a village or a town of little significance (Sharon 1986; Gat 2015).

An examination of the diagram above, presenting Christaller's theory, clarifies why the close proximity of two urban centers—one old, organically developing due to natural conditions, and one new, imposed by administrative decree—leads to the weakening of the historical urban center. Muslim sources frequently indicate that the decline of Lod, sometimes even described as its destruction, was caused by the founding of Ramla. For example, Yaqut al-Hamawi (1253) notes that Ramla was responsible for the destruction of

Lod (*wa kana Ramla sabab kharab Lod*) (Yaqut 1897). Al-Ya'qubi, writing in the early ninth century CE, describes Lod as entirely destroyed due to Sulayman's undertaking (al-Ya'qubi 1882: 328). This account is likely exaggerated, as even into the tenth century, al-Maqdisi could still present Lod as an important center, with a mosque larger than that of Ramla:

> Lod is located a mile [approximately two kilometers] from Ramla, and it has a mosque where more people gather than in the capital [Ramla] and in all the surrounding villages, and there is a huge church in which, at the end, Jesus will kill the Dajjal (the False Messiah is the Antichrist) (al-Maqdisi 1906: 176).

The establishment of Ramla as the provincial capital and the deliberate measures taken by the Umayyad administration to limit Lod, including the relocation of residents to the new city, brought about a dramatic transformation in Lod's status, reducing it to a secondary city in the province until the end of the early Islamic period. From the eleventh century onward, the separation between these two administrative entities persisted. Nevertheless, changes occurring in one city often affected the other, and at times the two were treated as if constituting a single urban unit. Their physical proximity likely contributed to rulers not distinguishing between them in administrative activities within the region.

On the eve of the First Crusade, deliberate actions were taken to destroy the main church in Lod, St. George's Church. Crusaders passing through Lod on their way to Jerusalem found the city abandoned and prayed in the ruined church before continuing toward Ramla and then Jerusalem (Sharon 2012). At the beginning of the Crusader kingdom, Lod and Ramla were combined into a single administrative unit, forming a unified seigneury under Robert of Rouen. Due to political conflicts over territorial control within the kingdom between the king and his vassals, this administrative arrangement underwent changes. Ultimately, from 1134 CE, Lod was designated as an independent ecclesiastical seigneury, separate from Ramla, which became a secular seigneury, governed by a lay noble rather than a church official (Mayer 1985). During the Crusader period, Lod's main church, St. George's, was restored, and adjacent to or within it, a fortress was constructed to protect the city's inhabitants when necessary (Pringle 1988). The city fell to Saladin in July 1187 and, following his defeat at Arsuf, in September 1191 he ordered the complete destruction of Lod's cathedral along with the fortress in Ramla (Baha al-Din 1938). The city returned to Crusader hands for a period as part of the Jaffa-Tel 'Ajul Treaties and fell to the Mamluk Sultan Baybars in 1266 (Ibn Shaddad 1962).

During the Mamluk period, and for most of the Ottoman period, Lod largely remained in the shadow of Ramla. Most descriptions preserved in European travel accounts—sometimes blending imagination with observation—portray Lod as a neglected village, whose main prestige derived from its historical remnants. For example, Pietro Casola (1494) notes that Lod is a small village, formerly called Diospolis, and describes its condition during his visit:

> In the small village, there was formerly a beautiful church built of square stones, said to contain the body of St. George, beheaded. Even the Muslims venerate this church, but the place is neglected (Casola 1907).

A significant change in Lod's history occurred with the construction of the Jaffa–Jerusalem railway in 1892. The passage of the railway through Lod and the town's designation as a station along the line contributed to improvements in the local economy and, consequently, to population growth. Moreover, being a stop on this railway represented a dramatic shift in the balance of power with Ramla, elevating Lod's importance relative to its neighbor (Sharon 2012). This marked the beginning of a reversal in the competitive relationship between these two urban entities. The reversal was completed during the British Mandate, when Lod was chosen as the district capital and a transportation hub, not only for its region but also for the British presence in the Middle East. These were years of significant urban development. The Ottoman railway line connecting Jaffa and Jerusalem, which stopped in Lod, was expanded, and a major branch extended from Lod to Cairo via al-Arish and Qantara. In 1937, an airstrip was inaugurated near

Lod, which later developed into Israel's main international airport (AM/12/M/8/5141).[2] The presence of British military camps in the city, combined with urban infrastructure developments, transformed Lod into a more important and central city than Ramla.

As 'Aref al-'Aref describes the dynamic between Lod and Ramla and Lod's demographic advantage over Ramla on the eve of the Palestinian Nakba:

> Lod and Ramla are twin cities located two kilometers apart, nearly identical in terms of population, customs, agriculture, and inhabitants. In the former [Lod], on the eve of the Nakba, there were 16,780 people… and in the latter [Ramla], there were 15,160 (al-'Aref 1989: III, 600).

The Establishment of the State of Israel and Geopolitical Changes in Lod and Ramla

The establishment of the State of Israel and the geopolitical changes following the 1948 war created a new urban reality in Lod and Ramla. Particularly relevant to the present study is Arnon Golan's observation at the beginning of his discussion on the settlement of these towns (as he defines them) after the founding of the state:

> In our discussion of these towns, they appeared as a single settlement area, both due to their physical proximity and because, during those years, this was typically how the planning, housing, and settlement institutions referred to them (Golan 2001: 153).

Similar to the Crusader administration, the early Israeli authorities did not see fit to observe historical distinctions and treated the two adjoining settlements as a single entity. Over time, however, they were administered as separate urban entities, despite their historical and demographic similarities.

After the cessation of hostilities, the city was governed by a military administrator, and the remaining population was concentrated in Lod around the Great Mosque and St. George's Church in the city center (Yacobi 2003). By July 1949, military administration ended, and control over the city was transferred to a civil authority. Like other formerly Arab cities—such as Beit She'an, Acre, and certainly Ramla and Lod underwent a process of Jewish settlement organized by the state authorities. Consequently, Lod became, de facto, a mixed city, with all the complexities this entailed within the Israeli context (Rabinovitz and Monterescu 2007). A similar process occurred in Ramla.

Despite their proximity to the Tel Aviv metropolitan area and Jerusalem and their central locations, both cities struggled to thrive and remained marginal within Israel. Furthermore, the prevailing public perception of the cities has been largely negative (Liberman 2008).[3] Currently, Lod has a population of approximately 96,000 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2025, Lod). The city ranks in cluster 4 out of 10 on the socioeconomic scale, and the average salary is about 80% of the national average. Additional indicators of Lod's urban challenges include political instability within the municipality, the establishment of temporary governing committees by the Ministry of the Interior in recent years, and the city's negative migration balance.

Ramla's situation is not significantly different. Like Lod, it ranks low among Israeli cities in socioeconomic indices, matriculation exam participation, and average municipal salaries (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2025, Ramla). This complex reality is well illustrated in the account of Ilan Harari, former head of the temporary governing committee for Lod (2007–2011):

2 My thanks to Dr. Asaf Selzer for this reference from Israel National Archive.

3 A faithful depiction of its complex situation was recently revealed to the camera in the documentary series "Lod: Between Despair and Hope," directed by Uri Rosenwaks and Eyal Balachsan.

> Both cities face numerous challenges, both socioeconomic and in terms of public perception. For example, the city experiences very high levels of crime (serious violence, drug offenses, property crimes), illegal construction at high rates, vandalism, and damage to public property and facilities. Infrastructure conditions (water, sewage, transportation) are poor in all areas, a sense of personal insecurity exacerbates residents' negative perception of the city, the city administration's past performance was lacking, work and management norms did not allow adequate service provision, and years of neglect by state enforcement authorities in many areas mean that a proposed municipal merger could irreversibly entrench these problems, making it impossible to address fundamental issues (Harari 2009).

Harari refers here to a municipal merger process examined by a committee established by then-Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit (2007–2009). Lod and Ramla "successfully" resisted this merger attempt and maintained their separation, as they have since the early eighth century. This dynamic, as will be discussed in what follows, is unique compared to numerous other cases of urban settlements growing in close proximity.

From Lod to Ramla—and Why Not "Ramlod"? A Comparative Perspective

The establishment of Ramla in the early eighth century as the provincial capital, adjacent to the older city of Lod, marked the beginning of a long-standing urban rivalry that generally resulted in the mutual weakening of both urban entities. An analysis of settlement trends based on the size of built-up and cultivated areas clearly shows that Lod gradually contracted from the founding of Ramla until the late Ottoman period (Ashkenazi et al. 2016). This rivalry was expressed, much like the competition between two sports teams, in stories and myths meant to elevate one city while ridiculing the other, naturally depending on the narrator's perspective.

One famous tale involves the minaret near the White Mosque in Ramla, constructed by the Mamluk Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun in 1318 (Silverman-Cytryn 2008). According to the story, the inhabitants of Lod were envious of this magnificent tower, visible from afar, and consulted an advisor on how to move it to their city. The advisor, however, decided to mock them, advising them to drag the minaret using elastic ropes. After a night of futile effort, the minaret remained in place (Vilnay 1961). This urban legend, commonly told in Ramla, served to portray the people of Lod as foolish in comparison to the clever inhabitants of Ramla. Beyond its folkloric function, the tale reflects a 1,300-year history of rivalry between the two cities. Since the eighth century, they have figuratively held each other by the neck, preventing mutual urban flourishing, with Ramla particularly obstructing Lod's return to its former status as a principal city in the district, as it was, for example, during the Byzantine period. This dynamic is indeed unique, as will be illustrated below through several comparative urban case studies from different regions and historical periods.

On the ruins of Aquincum, one of the key cities in the Roman Danubian fortifications, a new urban center, Óbuda, eventually emerged. South of it, by the ninth century CE, two urban centers arose on the west and east banks of the Danube: Buda and Pest (Morris 1994). These cities developed concurrently but in different ways during the Middle Ages. Buda served as the kingdom's capital and the residence of the king and his nobility, whereas Pest grew as a bourgeois city whose economy relied on trade. Their union began with the construction of a bridge connecting Buda and Pest, symbolically linking the nobility and peasants in the creation of a unified Hungarian national society (Beynon 1943). In 1872, as part of this process, the joint city of Budapest was established, encompassing the three previous urban entities: Óbuda, Buda, and Pest. This consolidation led to the city's growth into one of the most important and central cities in the Habsburg Empire, and later in Europe.

A similar process occurred in Tripoli, Lebanon, under Phoenician rule. In 358 BCE, three adjacent quarters were unified into a single city, whose name—Tripoli, literally "three cities"—reflected this heritage

(Hitti 1957). Sometimes, the process did not involve a full merger but rather the incorporation of the older city into a new urban entity constructed nearby or directly on its former site.

When the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur came to power, he initiated the construction of a new capital near the ruined palace of the Sasanian ruler in Ctesiphon. For the establishment of his new city, Madinat al-Salam—better known today as Baghdad—Al-Mansur reused materials from the old city, effectively integrating the previous settlement into the new one (Al-Sayed 1991).

The case of the Egyptian capitals illustrates a slightly different process, though similarly resulting in the absorption of prior urban centers into a single city. The first major urban center in the area was the Pharaonic capital of Men-nefer (c. 2750–2250 BCE), later known as Memphis under Alexander the Great and Hellenistic influence. After Egypt became a Roman province, a fortress called Babylon was established nearby. In 640 CE, the area was conquered by ʻAmr ibn al-ʻAs, who established the Muslim administrative capital, Fustat, near Babylon (Al-Sayed 1991). Under Abbasid rule, a new administrative quarter north of Fustat, al-ʻAskar, was created. When Ahmad ibn Tulun asserted semi-independence from the Abbasids, he founded a new administrative capital in 870 CE, north of this quarter, called al-Qattaʻi (Abu-Lughod 1971), centered around the Ibn Tulun Mosque, which stands in Cairo to this day. A major transformation in urban planning occurred under the Fatimids. After their conquest of Egypt in 969, the fourth Fatimid caliph, al-Mu'izz, instructed General Jawhar to construct a new capital north of the Tellinid quarter, al-Qahira (Cairo) (Al-Sayed 1991). By the Mamluk period (1260–1517), the previous urban nuclei had either merged or disappeared within the vast metropolitan area of Cairo, which remains Egypt's capital to this day.

These urban processes reveal a variety of outcomes, showing that no single theory or predictable trajectory exists for two neighboring urban centers. Will they eventually merge? Will they be absorbed into a new metropolitan entity? The possibilities are numerous. For instance, in 1909, a neighborhood called *Ahuzat Bayit* was established north of Jaffa, a city with a millennia-old urban history that had served as the metropolitan center for a large region (Azar Yahu 2005). By 1934, this neighborhood was officially recognized as the city of Tel Aviv. Following 1948 and the geopolitical changes accompanying Israel's founding, Jaffa became subordinate to the urban area of Tel Aviv. In 1950, the joint municipality of Tel Aviv-Jaffa was established. The rise of the suburb over the historic city could not have been predicted, and even the ambitious leaders of Tel Aviv could not have planned such a successful urban outcome.

These examples and many others reveal how forced geographic proximity or organic growth of neighboring urban nuclei eventually leads to urban consolidation. In this context, the dilemma highlighted at the beginning of this article regarding Lod and the continued preservation of the historical urban framework after the founding of Ramla becomes even more pronounced. This anomaly is striking: Historical analysis shows that after Ramla's establishment, Lod's urban condition has generally declined, and even Ramla itself, despite significant governmental investment, particularly during the early Islamic period, faced substantial difficulties and did not consistently thrive. Yet, despite the complex urban situation of both Lod and Ramla in the present day, any idea of merging them has been rejected by municipal authorities in both cities.

Concerns raised by Lod residents during discussions on the merger initiative launched by the interior minister at the time illustrate apprehensions about potential harm (Nevo 2009). Serving mayors have also expressed firm opposition and doubt regarding its benefits, as shown in an interview with certain of Lod's mayors:

> **Q: What do you think about the idea of merging Ramla and Lod?**
>
> **Lavi:** Merge? Let them first merge Givʻatayim and Ramat Gan. Then Rishon LeZion and Holon. Give me one successful model of a merger and we'll see what I do. Meanwhile, it's clear this leads nowhere.
>
> **Q: Raviv, what do you think?**
>
> I don't think the cities should be merged. Each city is unique (Sima 2014).

The merger question has, for now, been removed from the planning agenda. Whether it will happen in the future, whether it will improve the situation of these two adjacent cities or not, a longue durée historical review clearly shows that Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik's decision in the early eighth century indeed initiated Lod's decline. The establishment of Ramla as the Umayyad urban center of Jund Filastin is the primary reason Lod has remained a secondary city (or lower) since the eighth century CE. Christaller's central place theory further clarifies why the existence of two neighboring urban centers negatively affects their economic capacities and significance relative to their surrounding areas and agricultural hinterlands. The central issue discussed here has been the description and analysis of this anomaly and an attempt to understand its implications for Lod's urban development over the long historical trajectory. Would a future initiative creating a "Ramlod" from Ramla and Lod restore their historical urban prominence? This remains a critical question beyond the scope of the present discussion.

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