

Little was known about the archaeology of downtown Beirut before the development of the archaeological program started in recent years. The important historical tradition which gave the city a prominent function during antiquity, specially during the Roman and Byzantine period was unknown. Some archaeological work was done during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century by scientists and diplomats in the periphery of the old city. Du Mesnil du Buisson made a first attempt, in the early twenties, to study its remote past. He was followed by J. Lauffray who reconstructed from various excavations, the roman ruins in the heart of the city around the *Place de L'Etoile*. Further excavations carried out by the Department of Antiquities in Lebanon, always as a result of building programs, produced more information on the Roman and Byzantine city as well as some elements identifying the older part of Beirut on the original shoreline. Since 1975 new excavations brought to light fresh evidence on the Byzantine period of the city.

- Apart from its presumed, location little was known about the “tell” (archaeological mound created by the layering of consecutive urbanization) which was supposed to be the origin of the city.
- Almost nothing was known about the Hellenistic city except what was gathered by J. Lauffray about a few walls he identified in the forties and a little pottery found in a sounding at the end of the seventies.
- The Roman and Byzantine periods were better documented even if there was no evidence of the temples, the theater, the hippodrome quoted in literature.
- The medieval city, with the exception of its wall, was being very reluctant to work on a period considered too “modern.”

It was thus all too soon clear that any excavation in Beirut was going to revolutionize any existing information and understanding of the city’s history. Moreover, this is the first opportunity to undertake a large scale study of Beirut’s archaeological subsoil. As a result of the archaeological surveys made in the area of the *Rivoli* and *Byblos* buildings, it does seem that the original tell was located on a small limestone eroded out crop with a steep north face and a slightly sloping south face. The extension of this tell, covers a surface of about 20 000 square-meters. The geological studies and stratigraphic observations lead us to think that a small stream went down from the south to the bottom of the tell and was diverted there to the sea. We don’t know yet what was the exact interaction between the sea and this small natural stream and to what extent the sea went inland. The most important part of this tell was destroyed by the end of the 19th century, when the new harbor was built and after that by the foundations of the modern buildings. The rescue excavations in this area are therefore the last opportunity we have to study early Beirut. The area excavated by

L. Badr and N. Karam was located on the slope of the tell where the stratification at the bottom of the rocky outcrop can be observed. Apart from its scientific value the rescue excavations could guide the landscaping of this area whereby an appropriate selection of trees and archaeological artifacts would outline the location of the tell.

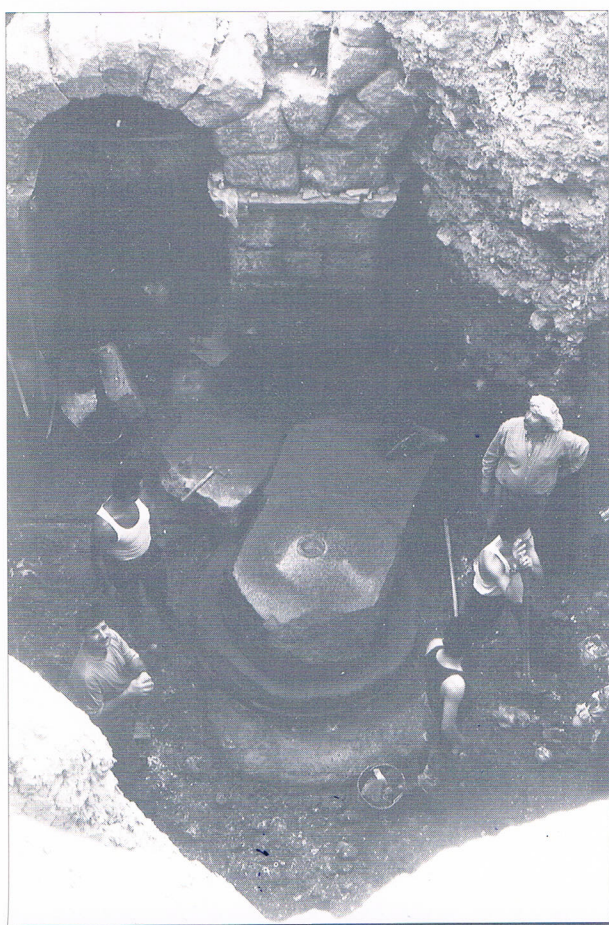
During the Hellenistic period it seems that the whole area was settled very differently. The city seems to expand out of the tell’s area and real urbanism develops. Streets such as the souk *Tawileh* in the souks area were built and the whole city adopted landmarks which remained unchanged thereafter throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods. The area in which evidence of the Hellenistic period was found suggests a huge demographic and economic evolution.

We weren’t expecting major discoveries of the Roman and Byzantine period except for the mythic school of law. Yet the excavations of the souks gives us the possibility to study a new area of this city. Houses decorated with mosaics, buildings made of huge stone-slabs, organized in a dense urbanism suggested that both residential and commercial activities were important in an area obviously understood to be dependent on the harbor.

In the thirties, a major Roman monument was found during the erection of the *Banco di Roma* building. In July 1995, new construction work in the same area created the need for an emergency rescue program to save the Roman building. It now appears that what has been revealed was the southern side of the forum. The structure had marble arches and was completely paneled with marble of various colors. The most important discovery from this excavation was the subterranean galleries (crypto-porticoes) which were distributed on at least two sides of the building. From these elements it may be possible to develop a new hypothesis about the center of Roman Beirut. It does seem that *rue Weygand*, which is supposed to be the *decumanus maximus*, was the limit of the monumental center and is flanked by the north side of the forum. The galleries found in the twenties under the building in front of the main mosque as well as the so-called cistern under the mosque itself could belong to the same system as the one found near the *Banco di Roma* building. If it was proved to be so, we would be able to reconstruct a forum with galleries on at least three sides.

The Medieval period was previously not very well documented. Even if scarce and fragmentary, new information has been gotten from recent excavations. The main discoveries were made in the souk area, where a Medieval moat cut in the rock was noted as well as various evidence of handicraft activities such as pottery or glass-making.

The scientific results of the excavations downtown Beirut are still to be exploited and it will take some time before we have publications on the different results. Yet we may say that the archaeological program of rescue excavation has already achieved at least one of its objectives, which is to create a public discussion about cultural heritage and its protection in the central district of Beirut and to hold this discussion at an international level. From the papers published in Beirut and with the interest of the archaeological community, it would seem that archaeology in the Lebanese capital is going to be a major element in the reconstruction of the city's central area. Archaeology is providing Beirut with new urban landmarks that are the documents of a city that has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times.



Roman ruins recently discovered in the Banco di Roma construction area



Foundation of a Tower, possibly Hellenistic, Eastern edge of downtown area



Souk Tawilé excavation, Ottoman foundations & Roman-Byzantine structures