

# Phoenician Archaeology Yesterday and Today

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Archaeological research in Phoenicia is characterized by special conditioning events which are closely linked to the history of the area and its geographic shape. The most obvious of these is the superimposition of modern buildings on ancient settlements, especially along the narrow coastal strip. Other factors include foreign economic interest and political events in the region which have created a negative impression of the area according to existing historical documents. An important conditioning factor lies in the expressed criticism of the scientists as and when they evaluated the Phoenician reality. Recurring opposite points of view among scientists wavered between, on the one hand, a complete dependence of Phoenician culture upon others and on the other, an exasperating Phoenician cultural originality; both views in fact separating this region from its real historical background.

In 1860 Napoleon III entrusted Ernest Renan known chiefly for his works on Semitic languages with a mission to explore Phoenicia. He was perhaps expecting to emulate in Asia Napoleon Bonaparte's auspicious Egyptian expedition. There were high hopes of uncovering famous ancient towns such as Byblos, Sidon and Tyre. This would have continued the "discovery of the Orient" by a France already impressed in 1847 by the androcephalic bulls discovered by Botta in the Assyrian palace of Khorsabad, near Mossul.

Renan did in fact join a French division sent to Syria in the wake of regional disturbances and this, as he himself wrote, because "France, in view of the importance she places on intellectual matters, has always associated her military expeditions with scientific ones". The mission lasted one year and its results were promptly published in *Mission de Phénicie* (Paris 1864). The repercussions were more political and psychological than scientific and in no way can compare with the great archaeological adventures of the 19th century.

As a result of the soundings taken by Renan in Byblos, a series of excavations was undertaken by Pierre Montet, the Egyptologist. In 1919, the joint Chambers of Commerce of Paris, Lyon and Marseille organised an exploratory mission to Syria to prepare an inventory of the economic resources of the region which was being

placed under a French Mandate. Montet was invited to participate because among the resources considered exploitable was the archaeological heritage of the region. The head of the mission Professor P. Huvelin (Faculté de droit, Université de Lyon) was to publish at the time a detailed report entitled "*Que vaut la Syrie?*" (Paris, Marseille 1919).

The topographic analysis of Byblos carried out by Montet revealed ancient material of Egyptian origin many with inscriptions and Pharaonic scrolls. These defined the city's historical importance and wealth. As a result the "*Académie des Inscriptions*" organised and funded regular archaeological excavations to Byblos which by 1921 had cost them around 100.00 French francs. Syria, now under French Mandate was governed by an army general appointed "*Haut-Commissaire*" who was assisted by Ch. Virolleaud as archaeological advisor. Simultaneously, Father Ronzevalle was in Beirut teaching at the Oriental Faculty of Saint Joseph University.

The four digs supervised by Montet between 1921 to 1924 uncovered parts of ancient Byblos with temples dated to the Bronze Age. In February 1922 the Royal Necropolis was discovered, quite by accident when part of the rocky cliff along the coast north of the site collapsed. This event was of enormous significance due to the quality of the material discovered in the tombs and of the large stone sarcophagi. These confirmed the historical importance of Byblos by way of their nomenclature of Egyptian pharaohs and for their Egyptian and Phoenician inscriptions.

In 1924, the Musée du Louvre advanced an amount of money to the project and received in return articles from the royal tomb III which were "*gracieusement*" (as Montet says) given by the *Conseil du Grand-Liban*.

Montet's book, "*Byblos et l'Égypte, quatre campagnes de fouilles à Gbeil, 1921-1922-1923-1924*" (Paris, 1928), is still a sound tool on the subject, especially for its rich catalogue of materials and for the numerous articles and communiqués regularly offered to the Académie. The book's long introduction describes, as usual, the most important data on the research concerning Byblos; the

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organisation of the work-camps, the financing, names of the participants etc. One can find in it, the names of the technicians from the “*Service des Antiquités*” and of the Beirut Museum, of scholars, even the young ones such as Dunand and Goetz, but above all, the names of sailors, soldiers and corporals of the French colonial regiments, placed by their superior officer at Montet’s disposal. These young men were the real strength of the excavations because they supposedly assured the traditional services of discipline and efficiency.

As in Renan’s time, artillery men from Senegal worked at the Montet excavations, directed by French soldiers. It seems that the latter were greatly admired by the visitors for the astounding speed at which they “transformed themselves into archaeologists”! Montet gives us information about the problem of the illicit excavations past and present, carried out by the inhabitants of the site, but also sometimes by foreigners, for example, we remember the description, quite punctilious, of pieces of paper found with “*quelques mots d’anglais*” written on them and the date 1851 in a plundered sarcophagus of the royal tomb IV.

Nothing is written however concerning the methods used for the research on the field and in the excavations. The technique required to dig in the rock chamber tombs is quite special and not without difficulties, but even if this be true, these technical and stratification problems can be easily dealt with. Nevertheless in the specific case of Byblos, the re-employment of older materials and tombs of the same reigning family, created doubts on different levels and about which we are still debating (as in the case of the tomb containing the big Ahiram sarcophagus with decorations in relief and inscriptions in Phoenician on the lid and on the wall of the entry pit of the hypogeal - this antiquity now lies in the Beirut National Museum). As for the rest, the archaeological and historical re-construction is based upon the analysis of the materials that have been found and that are being studied by themselves, disassociated from the remains of the walls and excavated levels. This kind of analysis can be defined as more antiquarian than archaeological, it is often used in the realm of Egyptian archaeology, but in this case, the large quantity of information obtained from the epigraphs causes us to neglect

other sources of information.

Montet ends his 1924 cycle of work in Byblos and goes back to his research in Egypt, but not before preparing the project to continue the work, that from 1926, would be entrusted to Maurice Dunand.

In his book, *Fouilles de Byblos*, I, (Paris 1939) about the excavations from 1926 to 1933, Dunand describes in an ample “*avant-propos*”, and sometimes minutely, the organisational side of excavations. It appears that the French governor was able to interest the young Republic in those excavations that from this moment became, (as Dunand says) “*une oeuvre scientifique presque exclusivement libanaise*” (*Fouilles de Byblos*, I, p.14).

In this introduction, Dunand exposes in a few pages the methodology of excavating that he applied (pages 6-10: *méthode de fouille et chronologie*); this same subject was resumed in the second volume of his book (p 3-7), published in 1954, after an interruption due to the Second World War. We know therefore that the same method was used by Dunand during the whole length of his work in Byblos, and for more than 40 campaigns of excavation between 1926 and 1973.

The principle adopted is the removal of the earth by regular horizontal digging, all in the same arbitrarily fixed thickness of 20 cms. This procedure of “*plaques minces*” was chosen by the archaeologist for its qualities of objectiveness; its scientific validity seems to be qualities by Dunand by the fact that it is, as he repeats in the above mentioned pages, a method “*d’usage habituel dans les études de sciences naturelles*”.

But in fact the objectiveness of this principle is simply a formal one, or better, a fictitious one, because the archaeological layers “*in situ*” are completely ignored, which means one ignores the vertical strata created by the succession of men’s activities.

The result is the disappearance or the pollution of historical documentation of the archaeological deposits, substituting it with sequential layers which can lead to all types of individual interpretations. Just as a matter of curiosity, this method, known as “in level” (planum), is described in Philip Barker’s book “*Techniques of Archaeological Excavations*” (1977) as one which is correctly used for places devoid of stratification by occupa-

tion. The result of Dunand's operations has been defined by a Lebanese archaeologist in these words: "today there remains of Byblos only museum objects and their un-integrated catalogues".

This is the outcome of the activity of an individual with a strong personality: an activity that was conducted in isolation and completely detached from the technological developments and improvements in the methodology of research in general which, of course, was analogous to the archaeological scene and could be found, for example, in near-by Palestine.

His trust in the so-called scientific objectivity permitted the over-active Dunand to devote himself to other research and other discoveries, rich in important material findings, as in the first excavations in 1926 at Bostan Ech Cheikh near Sidon where the famous Eshmoun sanctuary is to be found. This research was done by Dunand with a great passion but on a personal level, to such a point that he decided to conceal his principal find; the globular base of a Grecian-Persian style column that testified, without any doubt, the official presence of the Persians in the sanctuary, fearing, as he later wrote, that the dig would be removed from his directorship. "*de tous les côtés, on se fut précipité pour entreprendre des fouilles que je tenais à me réserver*" (apud R. A. Stucky, *Die Skulpturen aus dem Eshmun-Heiligtum bei Sidon*, Basel, 1993).

The excavations were, in fact, re-taken by Dunand about forty years later, with the campaigns from 1963-1979. R. A. Stucky, in his recent study on the sanctuary sculptures, indicates as one of the critical points of this research, the analysis of the places where the material was found; "*Raubgrabungen*" is the word that recurs often in Stucky's writings.

If the Byblos excavations were the work of one individual it is now essential that researchers and specialists in the different sections of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations, archaeologists, egyptologists and epigraphists collaborate fully in order to exploit the best available material findings in the hope that these discoveries will enlarge upon and then propose a reliable cultural and historical re-construction of this extraordinary site.

We can safely state that this work has already begun (cf. for ex. M. Saghieh, *Byblos in the Third Millennium*, Warminster, 1984) and that it will be lengthy. It is pos-

sible that in the future a staff of archaeologists working confidently and provided with sufficient technical and financial means, and chiefly with specific know-how which today is considered typical of the "Syria-Palestine archaeology" will decide to re-take in a new way, the excavations of the city's area and will bring to light more important archaeological and historical lore, to be reached, for example, in the central public zone with the Bronze period temples.

Modern Phoenician archaeology of the Iron Age is the result of a long process which began during the 60s just as the preceding phase was slowly reaching its conclusion. This process includes the research on the spot as well as the re-examination of the historical and cultural perspectives involved in it; in a word, this process integrated Phoenicia into the larger and more complex panorama of the ancient Near (Middle) East.

The first to stimulate this renewal was the Department of Antiquities of the Lebanese Republic, which was by necessity obliged to burden itself with the heavy heritage of the past. The Department had also allowed foreign missions to undertake archaeological excavations on individual sites where more often than not, important discoveries were made; we mention here for instance the German mission of Saarbrücken University, headed by Rolf Hachmann at Kamid el-Loz (1963-1981) and the American mission from the University of Pennsylvania, led by James Pritchard at Sarepta (1970-1974). Both these sites are in the south; one in the Beqaa plain and the other on the coast. In both cases the possibility of good work was guaranteed because modern super-impositions were not present.

As for the rest of Phoenicia, the research followed different itineraries and took place, not only on the basis of projects initiated by scientific questioning, but also to adapt this research to accommodate the swift development of the big coastal towns which was causing continuous interference with the historical patrimony. It required constant, difficult and minute work and of course was frequently thankless but the results were rich and important. I will mention just a few of the more interesting discoveries which have enabled us to further our knowledge of Phoenicia during the Iron Age.

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We must remember that very few Phoenician necropolis were regularly excavated and that the illicit excavations were much more frequent as was the easy recovery of collectible material. For instance, the work carried out during the extension of the Beirut airport runways uncovered the big Khaldé necropolis only partly excavated by Roger Saidah since 1961. This work was unfortunately interrupted in 1975 because of the Lebanese war and discontinued in 1979 by the premature death of this talented young Lebanese archaeologist. Saidah's studies and the preliminary publication of this site are nevertheless a basic contribution, not just to the knowledge of specific cultural aspects such as the burial rites, but also to some fundamental characteristic sequences of Phoenician pottery. Surprisingly, before those years, there had been doubts and misunderstandings regarding this pottery. Saidah's results in Khaldé were mostly confirmed by the excavations of Sarepta's settlement and by the soundings of P. Bikai in a limited outlying section of Tyre. The most important part of Saidah's research concern necropolis because it give us meaningful cultural and chronological contexts, as in, for instance, the case of Tamborit's tomb near Sidon which contained Phoenician material, including a geometrical pyxis from Argos, "*peut-être la plus ancienne des exportations géométriques grecques en Orient*" (as P. Courbin says, *Berytus* 25, 1977).

In Sidon-Dakerman, Saidah's work even if prematurely discontinued brought to light a large necropolis that surely belonged to Sidon's settlement and was used from the XIV century BC to the first AD with tombs and ritual patterns very different from those found in the documented necropolis on the surrounding hills containing the well-known anthropoid sarcophagi.

An important chalcolithic settlement with oval huts and boundary wall on this same site was the object of one of the last publications of Professor Saidah.

The present history of Phoenician archaeology is closely linked to the war in the Middle East with differing and sometimes paradoxically conflicting results. The tragic reality of present day hardships has for example caused the almost complete destruction through looting, of important sites as in the case of Kamid el-Loz. In other instances the war's devastation permitted the archaeologist to reach the deeper layers of ancient settlements like

Beirut as pointed out to us by the Director of Antiquities, Dr. Asmar.

The German excavations at Kamid el-Loz were mentioned by W. A. Ward as "a model of what an archaeological excavation ought to be (*BA* 57, n° 2, June 1994): this for the minute care with which the mission, for almost 20 years, studied the definition of excavation methods that could be applied to Phoenician settlements. It is only fair to add that it is not difficult to find other examples of sound modern methods, and not just in Phoenicia, nor only in the Middle East.

The other face of contemporary Phoenician archaeology is in Beirut where until a few years ago the basic technical problem was the eternal competition between urban development and research. The war's painful destruction of the modern town has been the occasion for the looting and stealing of ancient materials from the various sites and from the museums and collections. These antiquities were systematically absorbed by the international auction houses increasing their value and exciting the voracious appetites of the dealers and collectors, so much so, as to be compared to the drugs trade. It is sad to think that the buyers are from the European countries or from the USA; the same people whose economical assets allow them a certain level of education and culture to be able to admire these objects in the same countries that produced them.

Beirut's destruction has nevertheless stimulated courageous projects for the rescue of the old city. These projects involve the Department of Antiquities and all the other scientific organisations named by the Director General, Dr. Camille Asmar.

The Lebanese national UNESCO committee organised in June 1991 in Beirut a conference on the problems facing the archaeological heritage of the country and produced a final report which studied the problems of education and the illicit antiquities trade. Dr. Asmar has informed us about the November 1992 agreement about the project for the research and reconstruction of Beirut. The archaeologist has a lot of work yet to do and the support and encouragement of all people is a moral duty.