

Archaeological Work on the Souks Site, Beirut Central District

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The Anglo-Lebanese excavation of the large Souks site in Beirut is now drawing to a close. Some aspects of this project have been described in previous issues of this newsletter, and an interim report has been prepared for the first volume of the *Bulletin d'archéologie et d'architecture Libanaise* (BAAL), being prepared by the Directorate General of Antiquities. A version of this report can be found on the internet at http://www.aub.ac.lb/aub-online/faculties/arts_and_sciences/archaeology/indes.html. These reports concentrate on the Prehistoric, Classical and Islamic findings: the houses and mosaics, the workshops and streets, the works of art and household items. Some of the more exciting discoveries are the subject of a new exhibition at the British Museum. Since detailed accounts must await the study of the archaeological finds, it seems unnecessary to further rehearse such information here. It is, however, a useful moment to reflect on the successes and failures of this momentous archaeological exercise.

The Souks excavation has been a remarkable project, involving more than 70 professional archaeologists (mostly from Britain and Lebanon), and about 40 students (largely Lebanese), in over two years of continuous excavations. One of the reasons for involving a British team on the Souks site was because of the experience obtained in London and elsewhere in the fast-track excavation of deeply stratified urban sites ahead of redevelopment. During the 1970s techniques were refined to ensure that excavating quickly did not demand a sacrifice in quality. Previously a small number of supervisors, heading large teams of untrained excavators, were responsible for making all site records. Sections were made through selected strata and important structures were planned, but on complex sites it was difficult to adequately document the many different traces of past building operations which combined to give the full history of change. In the best of cases only an incomplete summary of the complexity of the archaeological site could be made, and the faster the excavations progressed the greater

the damage caused by the use of untrained staff. The new approach involved ensuring that each and every excavator was fully trained in the use of a sophisticated suite of recording techniques, and used these to make individual plans and records of all separate layers and features. Supervisors could instead concentrate on co-ordinating the works, checking records and maintaining a consistent standard.

In order to introduce such practices to Beirut - where the war had limited opportunities for learning new techniques - it was first necessary to train



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Lebanese students and graduate archaeologists in the intricacies of urban stratigraphic excavation and archaeological recording. The costs of this highly successful training exercise - which has involved students from most of the major Lebanese universities - were borne by a grant from the Leverhulme Research Foundation. Lebanon now has an emerging new generation of field archaeologists able to adapt the best of international experience to the particular circumstances of Beirut. Seminars and practical training courses continue, with the scientific analysis of glass, pottery and animal bone presently being taken forward by Lebanese archaeologists under the guidance of British specialists. Further training is still required in some of the more demanding tasks of off-site analysis and interpretation, but these young archaeologists, confident in field skills developed in

an exacting environment, are poised to take increasing responsibility for future excavations.

Other approaches on the Souks site included the use of flotation tanks to extract seeds and organic materials, and a sieving programme to obtain controlled groups of finds to permit statistical analysis. The detailed statistical analysis of changes in pottery assemblages - which permits the comparative study of ancient trading patterns and of socio-economic differentiation within and between settlements - is only possible where recovery of the material has been systematic, rather than biased towards the collection of more complete or striking material. For this reason, and notwithstanding the enormous logistical implications, all individual layers of spoil in key sample areas were carefully sieved to ensure that full pottery samples were recovered, and every single pot-



sherd has been kept for measurement and study.

The Souks excavations have also seen some pioneering use made of new technology. Electronic survey data has been transferred directly into a Geographic Information System which exploits a comprehensive relational database. Such systems are rapidly becoming essential to manage the vast amount of information recovered. When works are complete it is likely that over 20,000 different archaeological structures will have been identified and separately recorded on the Souks site, and many millions of finds are now being catalogued. The excavation team has experimented with different ways of speeding and simplifying the creation and management of these detailed records, and has also undertaken original research in the study of the processes of stratigraphic formation. The excavations in the Souks have therefore helped advance not just our understanding of ancient Beirut, but have made a significant contribution to the development of archaeological techniques, giving Lebanese students the opportunity to work at the forefront of archaeological research.

Given the scale and complexity of the project it was inevitable that mistakes were made. Many difficult decisions had to be made in particular over how much to preserve and how much to excavate; and where to concentrate effort and resources. Timetables and budgets were particularly difficult to manage given the unpredictable nature of the site. The irregular nature of past terracing on this low promontory meant that in some areas no remains at all survived, whilst elsewhere archaeological levels were over 7m deep. As much by luck as through good judgement the areas of the site where the best remains survived were those that were first opened up, and these were studied with painstaking care for over a year. The issue of how much to conserve was perhaps the most difficult. In most places the quarrying and re-use of the ancient stonework meant that the structures were too poorly preserved to be worth keeping for future display, but some of the better preserved elements of the houses and shops of late Roman date shown in the photograph above have been carefully lifted for conservation and eventual restoration.

The prevailing feeling obtained when the main site was finished was of enormous pride at the achieve-

ments made by a remarkably dedicated team. Others will only be able to judge how far this pride is justified when the studies of the excavated material are complete, and when the finds and structures lifted for conservation have been placed on display. The next stage of this project - resources permitting - will concentrate on presenting these results to a broader community, and through the work of reconstruction and dissemination allow all Lebanese to share in the exciting process of discovery that is underway.

These achievements were only made possible by the enlightened and professional approach adopted by the developers of the site, Solidère, and through the support and direction offered by Dr. Camille Asmar and his staff at the Department of Antiquities. The authors of this report, who have been co-ordinating the British effort in the Souks excavations, are above all indebted to their co-director, Professor Helga Seeden of the American University of Beirut, who has shown remarkable stamina in combining her normal teaching and academic duties with the extra burden of managing this vast project with its constant demands on her time.