

# NEW EXCAVATION AT SIDON

John Curtis

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Following the very successful exhibition on Beirut "Beirut Uncovering the Past" which was held at the British Museum from March to November 1996 the hope was expressed that the Lebanese Department of Antiquities and the British Museum would collaborate on other projects, including perhaps an excavation. With this possibility in mind in February 1997 John Curtis, Carole Mendleson, Claude Doumet-Serhal and Anne-Marie-Maila-Afeiche, visited a number of sites in Lebanon including Sidon. For a number of reasons, Sidon was identified as the most suitable site for an exploratory excavation.

Although Sidon was certainly one of the most important coastal towns of ancient Phoenicia, and is referred to in Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Greek sources, we have little information about the topography of the city in ancient times. It is known that in the Phoenician period Sidon was an important manufacturing centre, probably including bronzes and ivories. Homer describes the Sidonians as being skilled in all things, but no artifacts of this kind can now be identified. Some of the splendid Phoenician luxury goods that survive in finds from other sites in the ancient Near East, such as Nimrud in Assyria, might originally have been made in Sidon. In part, our ignorance about ancient Sidon stems from the fact that there has been relatively little excavation. The main areas of excavation until now have been the ancient cemeteries on the outskirts of the modern city, where large numbers of stone coffins were found, and the Temple of Eshmun some 3 km south-east of the modern city centre. Ancient Phoenician inscriptions indicate that Sidon was divided into two parts, an upper town and the maritime town. The latter presumably comprises those areas of ancient settlement near the so-called Egyptian harbour that include the murex hill and the huge tell on which the Castle of Saint Louis is built. It is this area that must have been the heart of ancient Sidon, and the great depth of deposit on the castle mound shows that the site was occupied

probably from prehistoric times onwards. It was in this area that excavations were undertaken by G. Contenau in 1914-20, M. Dunand in 1939-42 and 1964-5 and H. Kalayan in 1970, but the results are of limited value and tell us little about the history and material culture of Sidon in the pre-classical periods. It was therefore highly desirable that any new excavation should be concentrated on this area of Sidon.

This new excavation project started in the summer of 1998. The excavations were undertaken by the Lebanese Directorate of Antiquities with support from the British Museum. The first season of excavation, which lasted from 10th August-12th September 1998, was directed by Claude Doumet-Serhal. Team members included Hugh Barnes (architect), Rod Brook (archaeologist), Dafydd Griffiths (ceramics petrologist), John Curtis (special adviser), Mohamed-Toufic Rifai, Anne-Marie Maila-Afeiche, Dalida Chams-Eddine and Bahija Traboulsi (DGA). An initial topographical survey concentrated on those areas which had been acquired by the Directorate General of Antiquities in the early 1960s, namely the Castle of Saint Louis and surrounding enclosure, the "Sandikli site" east of the castle where the remains of a Roman bath house were found earlier, and the so-called "College site" north of the castle. Efforts were also made to plot the course of the mediaeval city wall, and a series of core samples were taken from around the harbour to establish its extent in antiquity. These are being analysed at the University of Aix-en-Provence.

In the first season actual excavation was restricted to the college site, previously occupied by the American Mission School until it was demolished between 1959-61. It was apparently here that a column capital in the form of a double bull protome, now in the National Museum in Beirut, was found when the Mission School was being built around 1800. This column capital of Achaemenid Persian style and dating from the 5th-4th centuries BC, presumably comes from a columned hall or *apadana* which might have been in this area. After



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the demolition of the school the French archaeologist Maurice Dunand made deep and extensive soundings here but according to his own account found nothing of significance. After his departure, the area was back-filled with rubble and rubbish.

The first task of the new excavation programme, was to remove some of this backfill with a mechanical excavator. In the course of this operation a small stone statuette of Hellenistic or Roman date, probably of the god Hermes, was recovered. Once a suitable area had been cleared, excavations were conducted in a trench measuring c. 5m x 5m and undisturbed Early Bronze Age deposits dating from c. 2500 BC were immediately encountered. The pottery, that was lying *in situ* on floors, included parts of large vessels with combed decoration and a few sherds with criss-cross painted designs. There was also part of a small jug with a handle ending at the top in a ram's head. This is the first time that Early Bronze Age pottery of this kind has been definitely attested at Sidon. Elsewhere in the Lebanon comparable pottery is known only from Byblos, Tell Arqa and the recent rescue excavations in Beirut. As yet, no Khirbet Kerak ware has been identified at Sidon.

In future seasons it is hoped to expose more of the Early Bronze Age settlement as well as to extend the area of investigation to the north part of the college site where the lie of the land suggests that the Iron Age levels may be undisturbed. This could be of great significance as not only would we learn more about Phoenician Sidon but it might be possible to trace the remains of the building to which the Persian period column capital belonged.

All those involved in this project are most grateful to Dr Camille Asmar, the former Director-General of Antiquities of Lebanon, and to the staff of the Directorate-General of Antiquities in Sidon, for facilitating this excavation and helping in innumerable ways.

1. The course of the mediaeval city wall on College site (map H. Barnes)
2. Excavation on College site

