

Beirut: Uncovering the Past

4

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Creating an exhibition in the British Museum

Following the very successful evening in the British Museum organised by the Lebanese British Friends of the National Museum last year, when the urban archaeologist, Philippe Marquis, gave a talk on the current excavations in downtown Beirut, the idea to have a small temporary exhibition in the Museum on the subject gradually took root. Though most people have heard of Beirut, until recently it has been in an unfortunate context. In fact, very little is known in Europe about the major international archaeological efforts being undertaken in Beirut since the end of the civil war.

At one point we thought of having a graphics exhibition only, based on the current excavations in downtown Beirut. This idea was gradually expanded and during the summer, talks with the Directorate General of Antiquities and the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education resulted in the idea of combining graphic material with some of the objects found alongside the very few objects in the Museum known to come from Beirut.

Unfortunately, nowadays, the Museum is unable to

put on unsponsored exhibitions. We were very fortunate that the Lebanese British Friends of the National Museum were able to persuade the Banque Audi and the Albert Abela Corporation to generously fund the exhibition which we have called *Beirut: Uncovering the Past*. In addition we are grateful to British Mediterranean Airways for their support in providing transport for the objects and a courier.

The aim of the exhibition is to show the history of Beirut, with the main focus on the current excavations but also using what we knew before to provide as complete a picture as possible. With this aim in mind we are using a number of early maps, engravings and photographs in order to illustrate what was known before alongside the results of the current excavations until now. Many people may not be aware that the first accurate surveys and maps of Beirut were done by the Royal Engineers after a British fleet bombarded and briefly occupied the city in 1840. These maps have remained the property of the Ministry of Defence and the Public Records Office. They will be seen by the public for the first time during this exhibition. Plans of the city during its different phases, from the Canaanite period through to the 16th century show what the current excavations have achieved. These have been drawn under the instructions of Philippe Marquis and Agnès Rousseau.

Beirut Uncovering the Past, view of exhibition at the British Museum

Among the objects being loaned to the British Museum are items ranging in date from the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC to the Roman period. They include a necklace of beads found in an undisturbed burial jar on the site of the ancient *tell*, terracotta figurines of the Phoenician period, Hellenistic gold earrings, a gold funeral mask and a marble statue of Venus.

From the collections of the British Museum come three letters written in Beirut during the 14th century BC on clay tablets in Babylonian cuneiform. These were written to the Egyptian king Akhenaton, two of them by the ruler of Beirut, Ammunira, the other by the ruler of Byblos, Rib Addi, who had fled



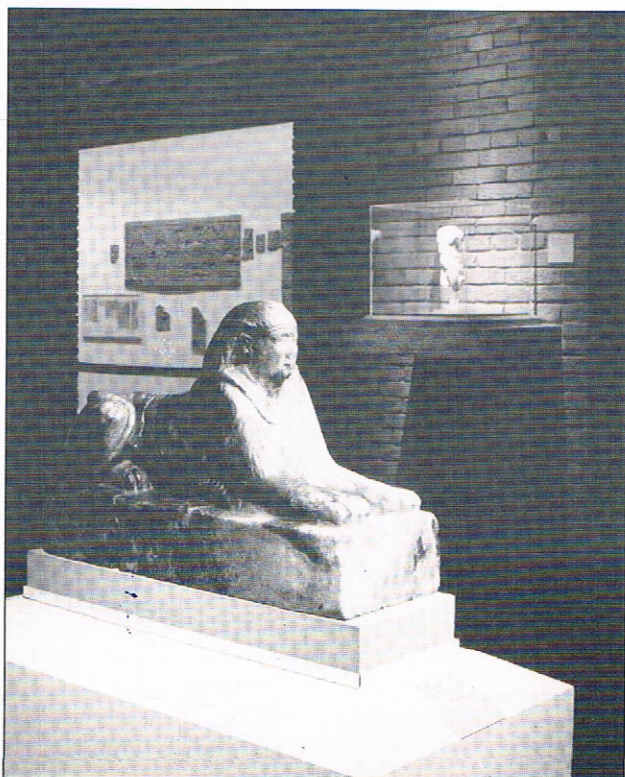
5 to Beirut. These letters are part of the foreign correspondence of Akhenaton and were found at his capital city of el-Amarna, in 1887 and are known as the Amarna letters. Most of them were written by rulers of Canaanite cities who were nominally under Egyptian control during this time. Another, even earlier, object in the exhibition is a stone sphinx thought to have been found in Beirut during the construction of the Rivoli building in 1926.

Organising an exhibition in the British Museum, even a small and temporary one such as this, is a complicated business. Many people are involved, not only curators. A design team deals with the look of the exhibition. It includes a "3-D" Designer who creates the layout and chooses the colour schemes, a Graphic Designer who deals with the illustrative material, including a poster and an Editor who, not surprisingly, works on the written information - the panels, labels, picture captions and the leaflet, together with the curators who actually write the material. With a good team everyone works together and pools ideas. One extra feature of our exhibition is that, because we have an abundance of photographs, engravings and maps, many more than could be included on the panels, we decided that it would be a pity not to allow visitors the opportunity of seeing them. We are therefore experimenting with an audio-visual slide programme which I am sure the public will find as interesting and fascinating as I do.

Though the main focus of the exhibition is on the current archaeological excavations, we are using these in tandem with other material, such as maps, engravings and early photographs and trying to put all the pieces together to reveal the story of Beirut until modern times.

The Museum would like to extend its special thanks to the Lebanese British Friends of the Beirut National Museum for all the effort that has gone into the creation of this exhibition. Without them none of it would have been possible.

The exhibition will be open to the public from 19 March to 5 September 1996.

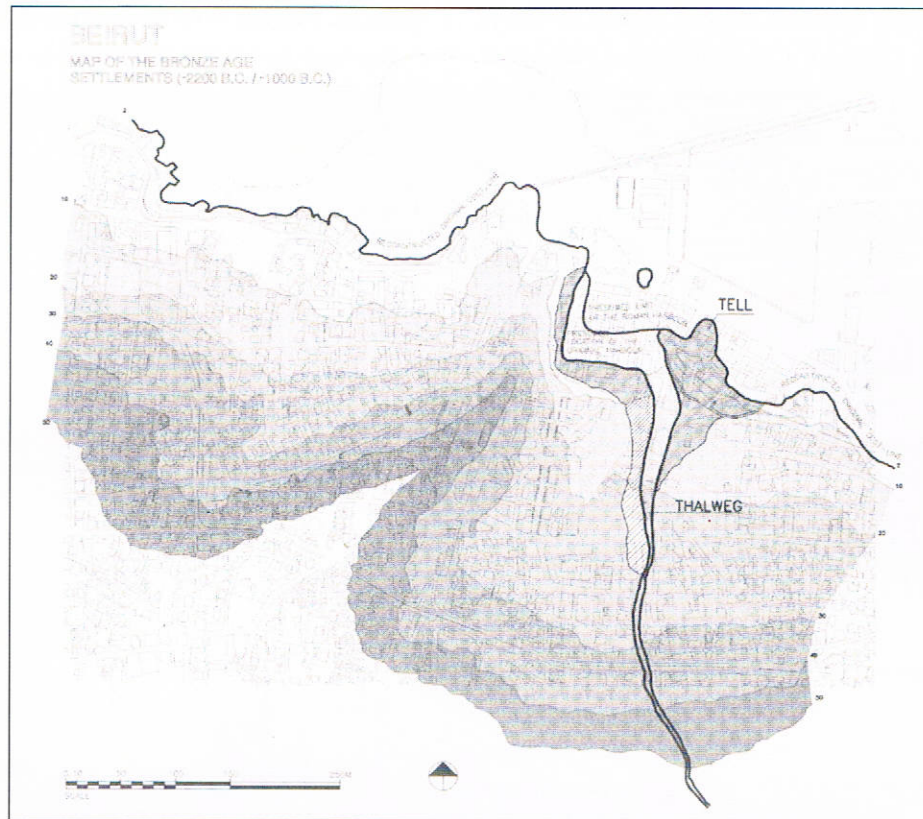


**Beirut
Uncovering the Past,
view of exhibition
at the British
Museum: Stone
Sphinx and Apollo**

Beirut: Uncovering the Past

6

Maps showing urban settlements in Beirut from 2200 BC to 1600 AD



Copyright© 1996 by the Lebanese British Friends of the National Museum Association. All rights reserved. Data for these maps was provided by archaeological excavations undertaken since 1993. Future editions will be updated according to ongoing archaeological research. These maps were conceived by Philippe Marquis and Agnès Rousseau and were drawn by Catherine Farah Ariss.

1-Bronze Age (2200 BC/1000 BC)

The original Bronze Age *tell* covering a surface of about 20,000 square meters was on a small limestone-eroded outcrop with a steep north face and a slightly sloping south face. A small stream went down from the south to the base of the *tell* whence it flowed to the sea.

2-Iron Age (1000 BC/333 BC)

A series of excavations carried out in the souk sector and north of Martyr Square unveiled the beginnings of urban planning and development from the Persian periods onwards.

3-Hellenistic Period (333 BC/64 BC)

Extensive demographic and economic expansion occurred in the Hellenistic Period. The *wadi* was filled in completely with the street grid extending over it. Such modifications accelerated the building up of the natural semi-circular site that sloped towards the harbour. These environmental changes had enormous consequences on the ecology of the natural site.



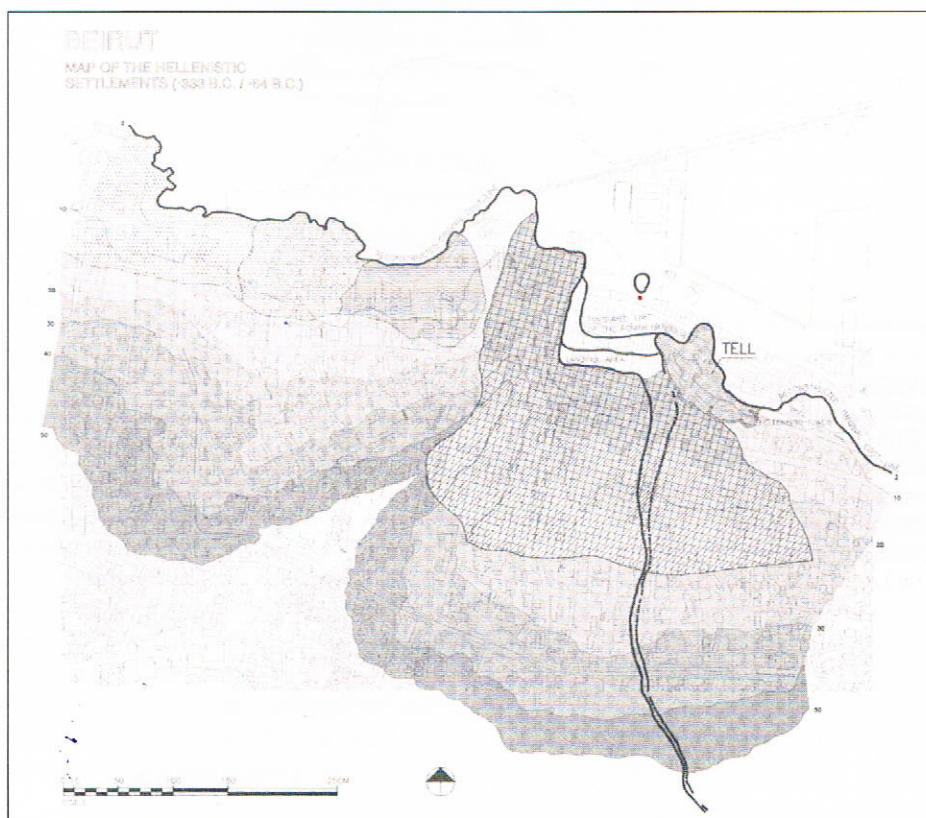
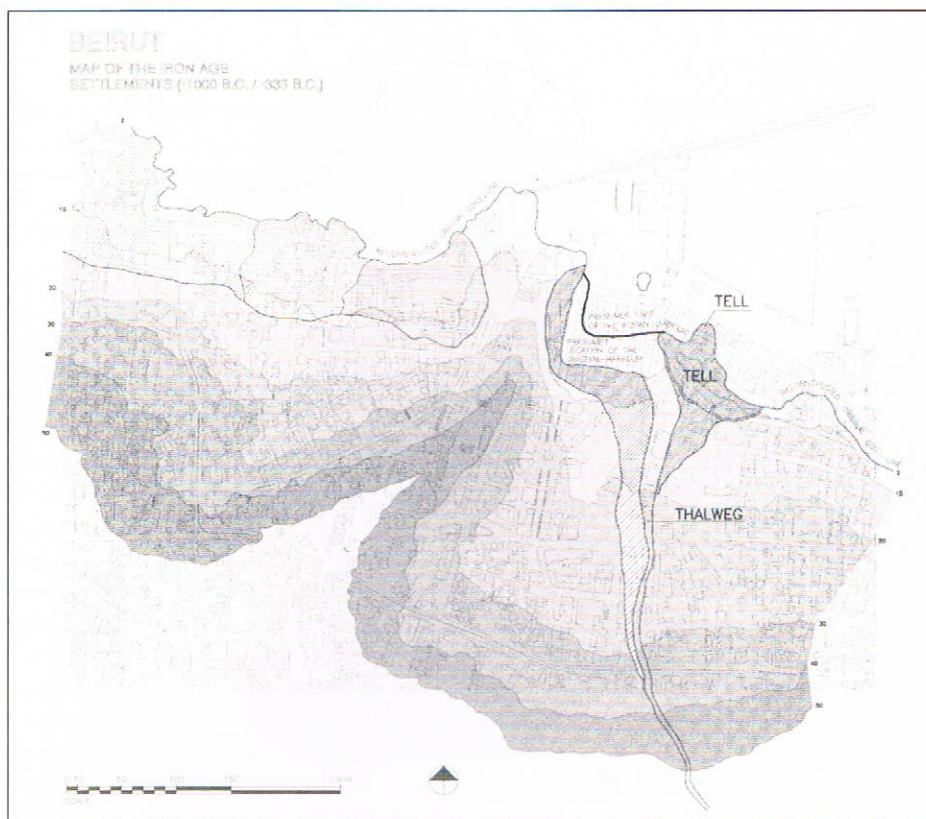
Elevation above sea level
Variable density of urban settlement



Elevation above sea level
Variable density of urban settlement
Variable density of necropolis area

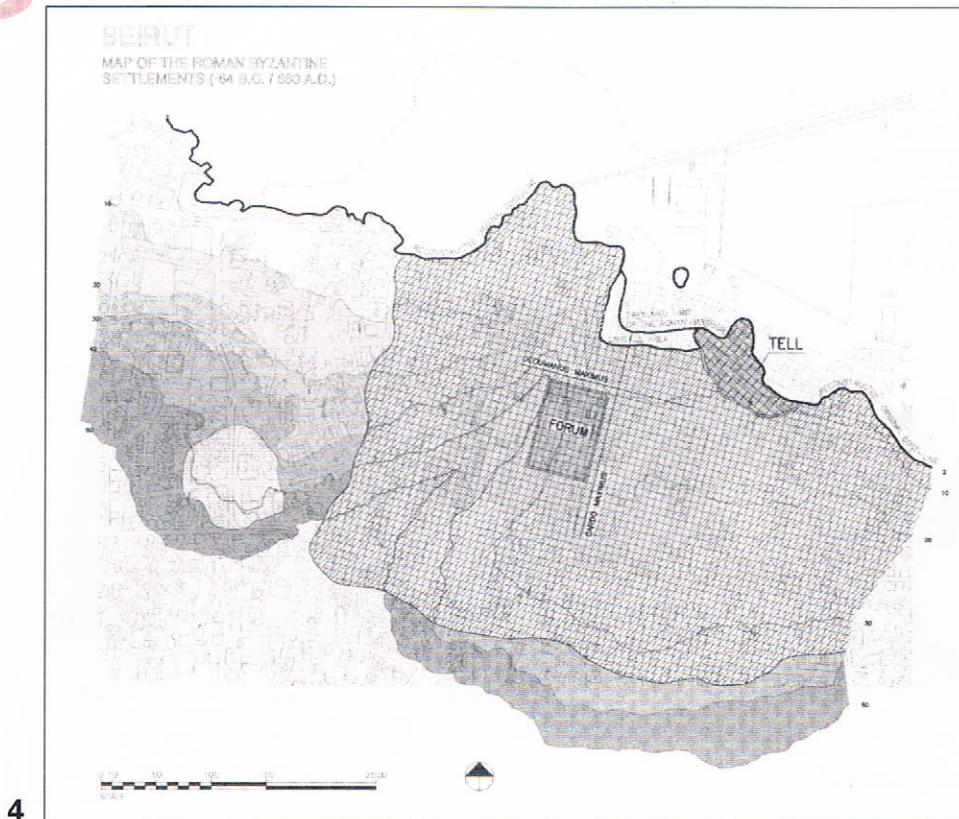


Elevation above sea level
Variable density of urban settlement
Variable density of necropolis area



Beirut: Uncovering the Past

8



4-Roman and Byzantine Periods (64 BC/660 AD)

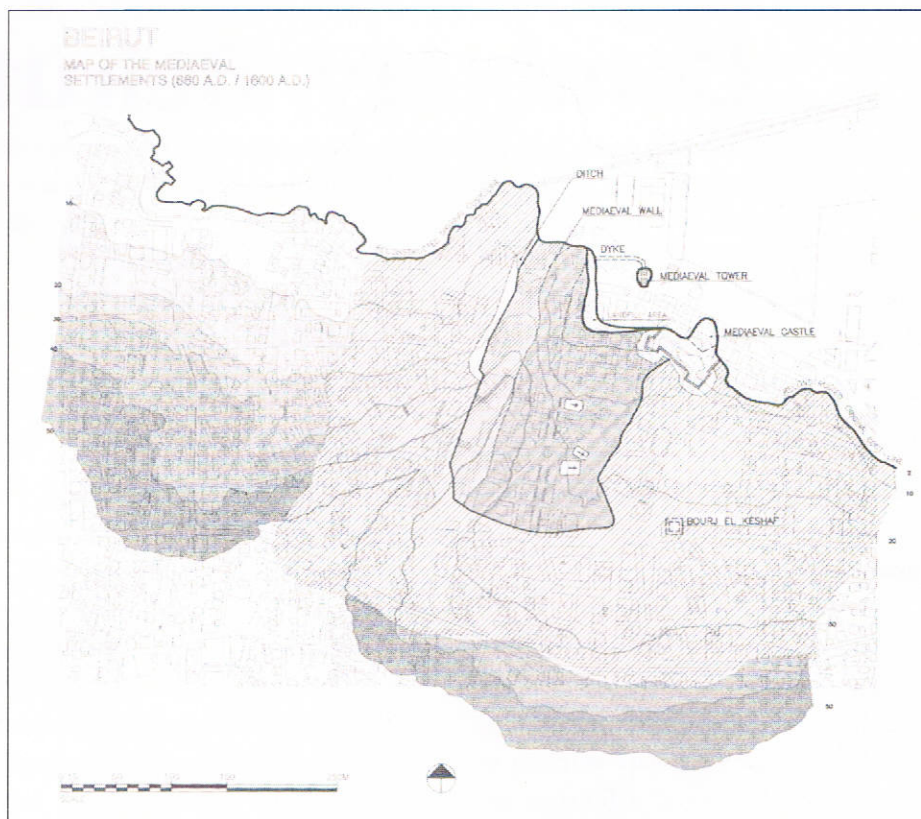
As a consequence of the founding of the Roman colony, *Colonia Julia Augusta Felix Berytus*, Beirut was extensively urbanised while the street plan remained unaltered.



Elevation above sea level

Variable density of urban settlement

Variable density of necropolis area



5-Medieval Settlements (660 AD/1600 AD)

The recently excavated ancient tell zone revealed the foundations of a Crusaders castle. By the end of the 18th century the city was a small Ottoman outpost.