

19 YEARS OF EXCAVATION IN SIDON, LEBANON.

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For the past 19 years and despite political uncertainties excavations have been undertaken in one of the most famous Phoenician harbours: Sidon, mentioned 38 times in the Old Testament and in Greek writings. The excavation, which is located right in the heart of modern Sidon, is the second urban excavation to take place in the Lebanon after Beirut. It is located on land expropriated for the specific purpose of research. What this actually means in practical terms is that, unlike Beirut, this is a project with no time limit and no pressure from developers. The site is called College site, named after two boy's schools which had occupied this particular location but which were later demolished around 1967. The most salient characteristic of the Sidon excavation was the revelation that the site provides an exceptional continuity in occupation. Once settled in their bedrock-based round houses at the end of the Chalcolithic Period, the Sidonians never left this location. It was to remain occupied almost continuously throughout the 3rd, the 2nd and well into the 1st Millennium BC streaming, uninterrupted, into the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Arab and Crusader periods,, and whereby all these Sidonians at one time or another, saw fit to take up residence.

We could begin by trying to understand why the Sidonians never left College site. Upon investigation, we determined that its location close to a safe and naturally protected harbour meant that they were able to communicate with the Aegean, Egypt, Cyprus and Anatolia. This is confirmed by the type, number and date of the artefacts uncovered on site. Their main means of transport abroad, as we all know, was by boat. An early second Millennium handle found in Sidon features a rare example of a masted sea-going vessel.

Exotic and utilitarian goods were traded alongside raw materials. Thus from Sidon's extraordinary 'College site' does the story of a city unfold, journeying from its bedrock foundations at the very end of the 4th Millennium BC to the 21st century AD, revealing to the world along the way its warrior graves, ritual feasting, early monumental building and extensive foreign trade connections. One of the most exciting experiences is to observe the extent to which the city received, absorbed, and then reinterpreted influences and thereby transmitting a distinctive and unique picture of a very important commercial and cultural hub in the ancient Mediterranean.

The aspirations at the end of this project are that this excavation will leave a legacy to the people of Lebanon. Not only are we hoping to broaden the history of the city of Sidon to an unprecedented degree but we also hope people will be able to visit the site and the new museum that will house all the uncovered artefacts where they can see for themselves what has been achieved.

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