Uncovering Sidon’s Long Life

For the first time, archaeologists are revealing the 4,000-year history of one of ancient Lebanon’s oldest ports

by Andrew Lawler

WEDGED BETWEEN A ROAD and decaying old houses perched on a hill, sits a massive excavation site. A century ago, this was the location of an American school and, after that, until a decade ago, was simply a vacant lot. But Lebanese archaeologist Claude Doumet-Serhal and her multinational team have transformed this apparently unremarkable spot into a window on the rich ancient history of the port city of Sidon. “In this little piece of land we have everything, a slice of civilization,” she says. “It’s very exciting.”

The reason for Doumet-Serhal’s enthusiasm is easy to see. In the shade of nearby bushes are piles of Roman bases, columns, and capitals. Crumbling houses sit atop the remains of a medieval wall within view of a ruined Crusader-era castle. Just beyond lies another thirteenth-century castle, overlooking the rocky shore of the Mediterranean Sea along Lebanon’s coast. Sidon is so old that, according to the Book of Genesis, it was named after the great-grandson of Noah. In antiquity, the city attracted an impressive array of visitors, both welcome and unwelcome, including the first-century B.C. king of Judea, Herod the Great; Jesus and St. Paul; the armies of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.; the twelfth-century A.D. Norwegian king Sigurd; and the Mongols of Central Asia a century later.

Several other ancient Lebanese coastal ports such as Tyre and Byblos were excavated long ago, but this modern-day sleepy fishing town completely covers ancient Sidon, making it largely inaccessible to archaeologists. All that has been known of the city comes from occasional mentions in ancient Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, and biblical texts—it is named 38 times in the Old Testament alone. These documents suggest that Sidon was the earliest home of the ancient Phoenicians—both the Bible and Homer refer to Phoenicians as “Sidonians.” Beginning around 1500 B.C., these seafaring people spread out from the region, establishing wealthy, independent city-states across the southern coast of the Mediterranean and in Sicily, and dominating the region for more than a thousand years. They were famed in particular for their expertise in extracting precious and valuable purple dye from murex snail shells. The very term “Phoenician” appears to be from the classical Greek word for purple. They did not call themselves Phoenicians, however, sometimes identifying themselves in contemporary texts as “Canaanites.”

The fifth-century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus comments in his Historia that the Phoenicians were known “to adventure on long voyages, freighting their vessels with the wares of Egypt and Assyria.” This mercantile people carried hunting dogs, glass, wine, and textiles from Spain to Somalia, according to other texts. Their great impact on civilization,
Although the modern town of Sidon sits directly on top of the ancient one, a multinational team has been working for more than a decade to uncover the many layers of the city's rich history.
however, was the development of a phonetic alphabet. Along with their wares, they spread this writing system across the Mediterranean, where it was assimilated and adapted by other cultures, including the Greeks.

Starting in the sixth century B.C., attacks on Phoenician settlements by Persians and Alexander the Great in the Near East and Greeks in Sicily eventually put the Phoenicians on the defensive and began their long decline. The Roman destruction of the colony of Carthage in modern Tunisia in the first century B.C., mentions of the Phoenicians almost cease, although the first-century A.D. Roman geographer Strabo reports that they continued to gather tin from Britain and copper from Cyprus to produce fine bronze. By then, Sidon was a Roman-controlled port with only limited regional reach.

Though much is known about the Phoenicians in their heyday, the archaeological evidence of their origins, how they lived, and the critical role of Sidon in that story has been sorely lacking. Beyond a few mentions in old texts, says Doumet-Serhal, “we knew zilch.”

Now in their fourteenth year, her excavations, sponsored by the British Museum and contributions from Lebanese banks and foundations, are beginning to fill in that gap. “During the first season, we found nothing, and I thought it was the end of the project,” Doumet-Serhal recalls. But in the last days they came across a few sherds of pottery dating to the third millennium B.C., and that discovery inspired her to keep going. Her tenacity proved to be a smart move, and the excavation has since uncovered remains that range from Sidon’s bloody days of the Crusades to its origin as a port when the first civilizations were taking root almost 5,000 years ago.

In the southern, shallower end of the 100-yard-long trench, Sidon’s story takes place in the days of the Crusades. The British Museum’s Sarah Collins carefully examines the skeleton of a thirteenth-century man who was beheaded and chopped to pieces. The bones are part of one or possibly two mass graves containing the remains of nearly two dozen young adults. There archaeologists also found an Italian coin dating to 1245 and a belt buckle that may have been made in medieval England, all evidence of a European presence at a time when soldiers flocked to the region in an effort to control Jerusalem and the surrounding Holy Land. Just below and to the east are the remains of a low curved stone wall that may be part of a long-lost theater dating to the early centuries A.D., possibly a remnant of Roman rule of the city.

A few steps to the north, archaeologists are looking for artifacts and architecture dating to Sidon’s Phoenician heyday, between the twelfth and fourth centuries B.C., but so far Doumet-Serhal has found only potsherds. Although the pottery does confirm that Sidon was indeed a Phoenician city, definitive archaeological evidence of its centrality to Phoenician life has yet to come to light. “So much has been added and destroyed,” Doumet-Serhal notes.

The team has, however, found clear evidence supporting the biblical implication that Sidon is a city of great antiquity. A few yards farther north, they have discovered the remains of a large stone temple dating to about 1300 B.C., along with pottery made in Mycenae, one of the most powerful Greek cities at the time. Nearby, the excavators also uncovered several Egyptian imports, including pottery, scarabs, and a jar incised with the name of Queen Twosret, who briefly ruled Egypt around 1190 B.C. as the last pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty. They also found the remains of a sistrum, a bronze musical instrument often associated with worship of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who is depicted on the handle. As Hathor is often seen as the personification of love, joy, and dance, the sistrum, says Doumet-Serhal, indicates that the temple was a place of feasting and celebration. And the connections with faraway Greece and Egypt attest to the cosmopolitan nature of Sidon in particular, and the land of Canaan in general, in the Late Bronze Age. Close by is an even older portion of the complex dating to about 1750 B.C., centered on a large windowless room with 500 scattered pottery lamps, numerous plates, and the knucklebones of animals, possibly evidence of an ancient game or ritual. Another important find from this era is a Minoan-style cup, which Doumet-Serhal says comes from
mortars and pestles, as well as evidence for fires made beside graves for funeral gatherings. The finds were puzzling at first. "It took years for us to understand that they were feasting on lentils, chickpeas, barley, and meat," says Doumet-Serhal. These funeral feasts are a common feature of later Phoenician culture and religion.

Perhaps most intriguing, however, is what lay below the clean white layer of sand at the dig's northern end. Here the team found exciting evidence that Sidon's history predates the Phoenicians' rise, and that it was a thriving port town at the same time that the first cities appeared in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iran, and the Indus Valley. These lowest levels provide some of the best and earliest evidence of Early Bronze Age life in the Levant. They contain not only sherds from modest bowls, plates, and cups, but also large containers used for transporting wine, oil, or perhaps other commodities meant for trade. Bronze fishhooks and the bones of deep-water tuna found at the site testify to the Sidonians' familiarity with the open sea.

As early as 2800 B.C., they had also built a large structure with as many as ten rooms, a great number for this early date, and two centuries later a sturdy oak and olive wood roof was added. There is no evidence for use of the famed cedars of Phaistos on Crete and dates to about 1900 B.C. It is the earliest known import from the Aegean world to Lebanon, and the first tangible connection between Sidon and the Minoan civilization on Crete and the coast of the Mediterranean.

A long with the temple complex, the team has found more than 100 burials: some male warriors with weapons, some women buried with their fine jewelry, and a number of children's graves. The cemetery's first use dates to the Middle Bronze Age, just after 2000 B.C., when Sidonians covered the area with a thick layer of fine sand. Scattered around are large ovens, piles of butchered animal bones, food remains, and mortars and pestles, as well as evidence for fires made beside graves for funeral gatherings. The finds were puzzling at first. "It took years for us to understand that they were feasting on lentils, chickpeas, barley, and meat," says Doumer-Serhal. These funeral feasts are a common feature of later Phoenician culture and religion.

Thus far archaeologists have excavated more than 100 graves dating from the second millennium B.C. These include the remains of a child who was buried in a large pottery jar (top left), as well as several belonging to warriors buried with their weapons (middle left). A spearhead shows traces of the twine that once bound it to the shaft (bottom left), and an axhead was found near a warrior's shoulder (above).

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Sidon. For the upcoming season, she wants to probe the extent of the early-third-millennium B.C. building, further excavate the second-millennium B.C. temple, and look for more clues in the funerary courtyard. But she has already demonstrated conclusively that Sidon led a very long life of nearly continuous occupation from its early origins, and that its existence was deeply intertwined with the entire history of the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. “We can now show the evolution of Sidon’s people and traditions,” she adds. “This place is a gift.”

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Lebanon, which Doumet-Serhal says may have been reserved for export to Egypt and Mesopotamia, where they are frequently mentioned in contemporary texts. Inside the building’s ancient storerooms, built of stone and not the usual mudbrick, the team uncovered a cache of more than 350 pounds of burnt barley as well as a quantity of burnt emmer, one of the oldest domesticated types of wheat, first found in Syria as early as the Neolithic period. Why and how they were burned remains unclear.

In addition to grain, the diet of the ancient Sidonians included sheep and goat, which was typical for the region. The team also uncovered a surprising amount of evidence for the consumption of wild game, including bones from lions, bears, deer, wild boar, hippopotamus, and wild cattle. Since this wild diet is quite different from what’s known from that of other towns on the coast, Doumet-Serhal suspects that hunting here may have been an elite activity, hinting at the possible presence of a king and court in these early days. By the middle of the third millennium B.C., however, Sidon appears to have been abandoned, although the reasons for this are uncertain and there are, as yet, no signs of violent destruction.

Though they have reached what may be some of the oldest layers, Doumet-Serhal’s team is far from done with Sidon. For the upcoming season, she wants to probe the extent of the early-third-millennium B.C. building, further excavate the second-millennium B.C. temple, and look for more clues in the funerary courtyard. But she has already demonstrated conclusively that Sidon led a very long life of nearly continuous occupation from its early origins, and that its existence was deeply intertwined with the entire history of the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. “We can now show the evolution of Sidon’s people and traditions,” she adds. “This place is a gift.”

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