

# THE MEDITERRANEAN COAST

TYRE: A HISTORICAL AND AN ARCHITECTURAL  
OVERVIEW

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## The History

The complex history of Tyre (Şur) spans some 4000 years. It seems that the city originally consisted of an inland city, Palaetyrus (Ushu) and an island fortress. The city's geographical position is approximately 33 kilometers south of Sidon. The total circuit of Palaetyrus and the island is, according to Pliny the Elder, for the city 19 Roman miles, which is approximately 5.6 kilometers and for the island less than three miles, which is about 0.8 kilometers. Tyre took its name from the island, the Semitic Şr, meaning rock. The city's location on an island made it one of the greatest sea fare and commercial nations in Antiquity.

Herodotus visited the city during the fifth century BC. He accounts seeing the temple of Heracles (Melkart). According to Herodotus the temple had been built when the city was founded 2300 years prior to his visit, which would have been around 2750 BC and a small excavation led by Patricia Maynor Bikai in 1973 confirmed the date of this early settlement. Our earliest written evidence confirming the vast importance of Tyre during the Bronze Age is the Tell el-Armana Tablets. From the correspondences between the two Pharaohs, Amenhotep III (1417-1379 BC) and his son Amenhotep IV (Akhenaton 1379-1362 BC) and the kings of Tyre we learn of the political, economical and social situation. The tablets confirm that Tyre was autonomous with a royal house, but that it was at the same time loyal to Egypt, who was the leading power in western Asia.

In the Iron Age during the reign of Hiram (970-936 BC) the city enjoyed its heydays. The king's ambitiousness made him famous and Solomon, the king of Israel, had Tyrians construct the Great temple of Jerusalem. During the Assyrian-Babylonian Period Tyre was conquered on more than one occasion. In 572 BC, after having withstood the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's armies for thirteen years, Tyre submitted and its superior position was weakened so badly that Sidon, for a while, became the leading Phoenician city. The declining commercial situation of Tyre seems to have continued well into the Persian Period. However, the first Phoenician coin was struck in Tyre around 550 BC, which could indicate the growing weakness of Persia.

In 336 BC, Alexander the Great began his preparations to conquer the East. The conquest of Tyre however revealed to be difficult, but after a long siege the mole that Alexander had built which joined the mainland and the island eventually led to the defeat of the Tyrians. After the death of Alexander, Phoenicia was given to Laomedon and was soon thereafter annexed into Ptolemy's empire. In the following years Phoenicia passed back and forth between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids before, finally, passing into the

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possession of the Seleucids in 198 BC. In the time of Antiochus IV's rule Tyre rapidly became Hellenized. The gradual weakness of the Seleucids made them appoint Tigranes to govern the country, which he did from 83 BC until the Romans arrived in 69 BC. Phoenicia was then included in the Roman province of "Syria". The city flourished anew and especially the old purple dye industry and the linen and glass production again made Tyre an important commercial centre, which also obtained monopoly of the tin trade. In addition, to affirm its importance the city was renamed "Tyros Metropolis" by Hadrian. Then in the fourth century AD Tyre became a Byzantine monarchy with Christianity as the new dominant religion and in 635 AD. Damascus, which Tyre was under the rule of, fell at the hands of the Arabs. Tyre also played an important historical role in the Period of the Crusades, but from the last half of the twelfth century onwards the city suffered greatly due to multiple earthquakes and other devastating disasters.

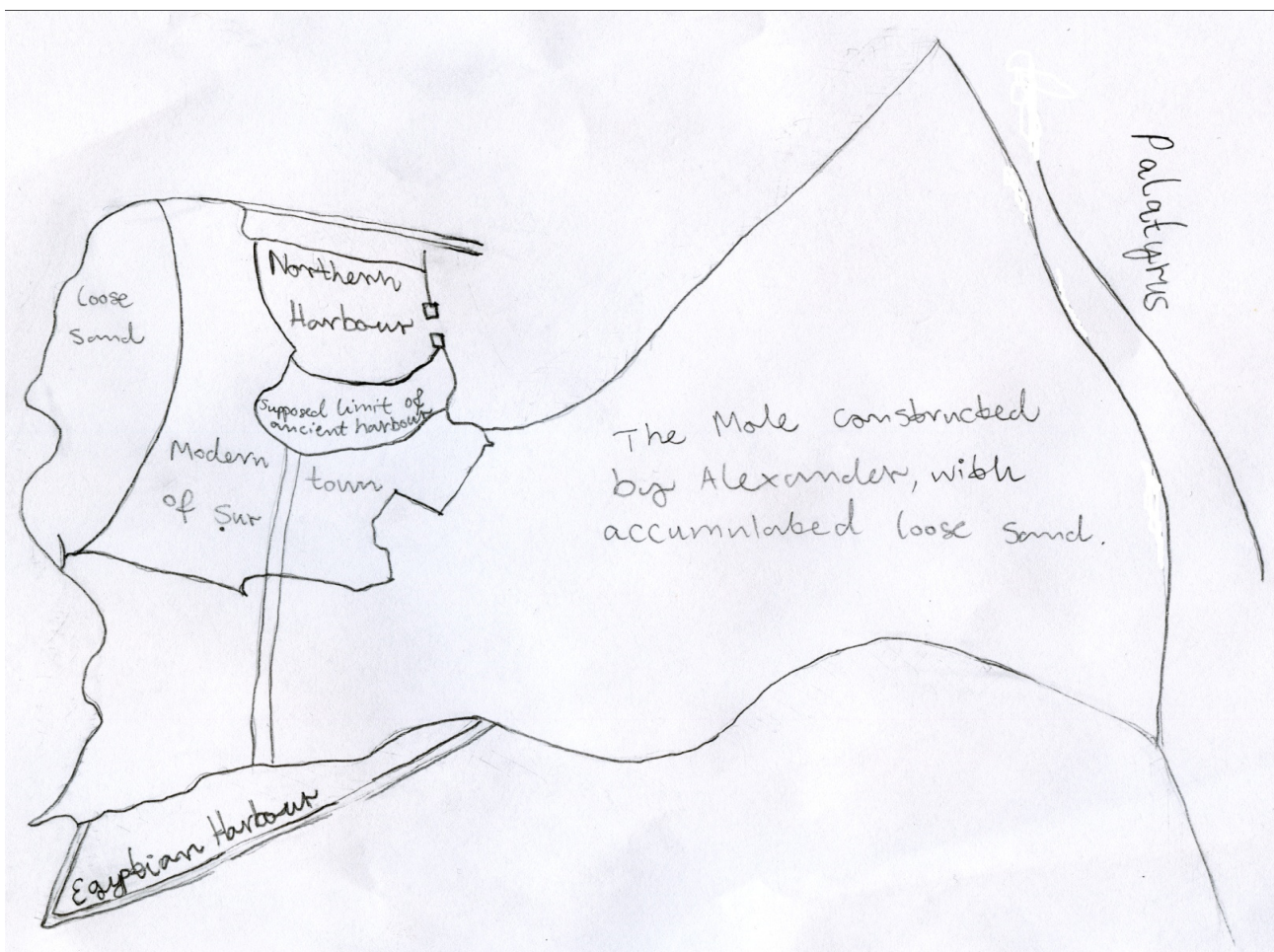


Fig. 1: Copied plan from John Kenrick, *Phoenicia*, 1855.

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### The Site

The archaeological remains of Tyre are plenty. The great temples of Melkart and Astarte are still waiting to be found, however, a structure dedicated to Apollo due to an inscription, has been uncovered in the Al-Bass cemetery. This complex, which is today partially under water, is of great interest. The complex consist of a so-called "Skene" and "The Yard". The Skene structure seems to be where the possible cultic activities took place and many water basins and a natural well has been discovered there. The Skene had two main phases and was primarily used from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. A similar complex dedicated to an unknown deity, has been found in the temple area of Bethsaida in Israel.



Fig. 2: The Apollo Complex. Looking north.

Though not many cultic structures have been found in Tyre, there are plenty of public monuments. The city's important monuments are primarily placed on two locations; in the "City of the Dead", located



Photo: Ditte Hiort

Fig. 3: The Apollo Complex. Looking west.

on the Alexandrian causeway, which over the centuries has enlarged due to accumulating sand and "The Imperial City" which is located on the southern part of the island. The modern town of Şur is located on the northern part of the island and includes the ancient "Sidonian Port", which is still in use. Harbour silting and costal progradation has hidden large parts (*the main part of the ancient harbour*) of the original port under the medieval and modern centres. New geological surveys have

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shown that this port was in use as a natural harbour and place of anchorage already in the Bronze Age. A probable direct effect of Hiram's great expansions in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC was the new design of the port, which meant an artificial constructed harbour complex. The port was built in the more unusual "Closed Port" manner, which meant it was included into the perimeter of the city walls to protect it as much as possible. It was also changed, enlarged and rebuilt on many occasions during the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods.

The Decumanus Maximus leads from the mainland, the Roman-Byzantine necropolis, directly to "The Egyptian Port". A part of the Roman road begins in the western part of the mole. This part of the road is 170 meters long and 11 meters wide and bordered on both sides by a colonnade of cipollino marble columns and porticoes which is over 5 meters in width on both sides, and dates to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. It was originally paved with mosaics that followed a uniform geometric design of circles. It was re-paved with marble slabs during the reign of Septimius Severus, when Tyre also received its new title as Colonia, yet another sign of its vast importance.



Fig. 4: The Decumanus Maximus, with cipollino columns. Looking south towards the "Egyptian Port".

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The Roman 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD hippodrome is placed in the southernmost part of the causeway. It extends 480 meters in length, 160 meters in width and is one of the largest hippodromes ever found. This grand monument must have been quite the sight, with its great variety of different kinds of imported marble, granite and important guests from all over the Empire. No doubt it played an important political and social role in Roman times as a point of gathering and strengthening political ties.

Entering "The Imperial City" is a smaller secondary colonnaded street bordered by houses and shops placed on the right. Immediately thereafter is a rectangular structure, which measures around 45 meters in length and 34 in width. It could be filled with water and perhaps it functioned as a place of cultic practice? Other structures resembling this one, has been found in the Mediterranean, some pointing at a cultic practice for increasing women's fertility. The building has five rows of steps surrounded by vaulted cisterns, which were probably used as water reservoirs. Diagonally opposite this building are the Roman baths. They also date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, but seem to have been used also in the Byzantine and Arab Periods.



Fig. 5: Mosaic pavement from the Decumanus Maximus with the later marble pavement on top.



Fig. 6: The Hippodrome. Looking north.

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Fig. 7: The cultic structure. Looking southeast.

A cluster of the principal Tyrian monuments is located immediately thereafter. The main monument is a square market place or Palaestra from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD found beneath the Byzantine levels. Each side extends 35 meters and is surrounded on three sides by a colonnade of grey granite columns. One enters the building from the seaside through a large doorway flanked by smaller ones. In the centre of the building is a courtyard with a large pond covered with a white mosaic. Later on cisterns have been built around the building, suggesting a Byzantine dyers quarter, which seems plausible due to the dumping ground containing crushed Murex shells also found during excavations in the area. Underneath the colonnade was revealed another older dumping ground, suggesting that this quarter was a part of the industrial dying industry long before the Byzantine Era. Doric sandstone columns and capitals, which appear to be from Hellenistic age, were found in the area of what could be the remnants of a civic building from the Greek period. Remnants of the city walls from the Phoenician Period have been located in the southeast corner of the Byzantine dumping ground.

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Fig. 8: The northeastern side of the Palaestra or Market Place.

Reaching the southern coastline, nothing is visible of the “Egyptian Port”. The whole port is today completely submerged.

According to new geological research along the Phoenician coast, undertaken by Nick Marriner and others, the position of the southern harbour, did not include the western tip of the island as Poidebard thought, but was located much more to the east, which supports the theory of Ernest Renan.

The port was a more traditional and completely artificial open port and according to Marcoe dates in its initial phase to approximately the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, but according to Poidebard it dates to the Persian or Greek Period, when the two-port system prevailed. It has been rebuilt several times, as was the case with the “Sidonian Port”.

The harbour was constructed with the breakwaters built on two submerged offshore reefs. Bedding was then created to level with the reefs, where upon the mole’s ashlar foundations were fixed. These, in turn, supported a stone superstructure.

The large Iron Age trade with the Nile Valley necessitated the construction of a new large port. But most probably the south side also functioned as a natural harbour long before the artificial construction. The reefs to the west and east of the port provided natural anchorage for more ships than the inside of the harbour could accommodate. This is confirmed by several anchorage finds which was originally one of Renan’s points, he just did not have the technical possibilities for exploring his hypothesis.



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At Tyre burials are attested from the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Roman period and the Byzantine period. From the Bronze Age a few inhumations have been discovered at the island of Tyre, but the later necropoleis were moved to the mainland. Two necropoleis have been discovered on the mainland at Tyre Al-Bass, dating to the Iron Age (9<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> century BC) and were used by the Phoenicians. The first was discovered in 1991 and was located on the mainland in the area of the Roman and Byzantine cemetery, but clandestine excavations had heavily disturbed it.

The necropolis contained cremations in urns, burial gifts and stelai. Bowls and plates were used to cover the mouth of the urns and burial gifts were placed in the urns, such as scarabs, amulets, jewellery etc. The burial gifts were probably personal items and therefore buried with their owner. Some burial gifts had been placed next to the urns, which were Phoenician pottery.

The other necropolis from the Iron Age was excavated under the supervision of Maria Eugenia Aubet in 1999 and 2002. This necropolis was also located very close to the Roman and Byzantine necropolis, about 2 km from the ancient island of Tyre. The necropolis contained urns with cremations, a huge bulk of burial gifts and stelai. The urns were arranged in either assemblages of 6 to 10 urns, in pairs or isolated.

The same items accompanied most of the urns. This included a plate or a small piece of stone capping the mouth of the urn, two jugs leaning against the body of the urn and a plate or bowl of Fine Ware at the foot of the urn or near it. The isolated urns show the greatest ritual complexity and are the most rich and abundant. There are also traces of a bonfire being lit next to these urns before the graves were closed.



Fig. 1: Terracotta mask.



Fig. 2: Terracotta horseman.

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The burial gifts consisted of wooden boxes deposited above the urns, containing terracottas and these could be masks, horsemen or architectonic representations of sanctuaries. The burial gifts also included beads, scarabs, tablets and pendants. Meals could be cremated together with the deceased and traces of birds, reptiles and fish have been found. The pottery from both the necropoleis, from the Iron Age suggests that the symposium was a large part of the funeral rites. Also, both of the necropoleis are located on the mainland and suggest an emphasis on keeping the area of the living separated from those of the dead.

Sader claims that the necropolis discovered in 1991 is a tophet, which is a necropolis discovered in many of the Phoenician colonies in the Mediterranean containing cremation of children and animals, together with a huge bulk of stelai. Cremation is used throughout all of Lebanon and most often these cremations are of adults, whereas children are inhumed in jars. An analysis of the few cremated bones that were retrieved from the urns from this necropolis, showed that three of them may have contained adult cremations and one of the bones is possible the remains of a sheep.

The large number of stelai and urns is a good argument for this theory but other cremation necropoleis in Lebanon also have a lot of urns though less stelai. The stelai from both of the Iron Age necropoleis have the same repertoire of shapes as well as many of the motifs and names of the gods are seen at other places in Lebanon. I do not believe that it should be seen as a tophet, the way we are familiar with it from the western colonies, as there are no remains of infants and almost no remains of animals. The Iron Age burials therefore probably originated from the same necropolis, which is also suggested by Aubet.

The Roman necropolis (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century AD) was located close to the before mentioned Iron Age necropolis.

The Roman necropolis was excavated between 1959 and 1975 under the supervision of Maurice Chéhab. The necropolis extended on either side of the Roman main thoroughfare road. The road was 170 meters long and 11 meters wide and was constantly enlarged during its



Photo: Signe Krag

Fig. 3: Loculi and a sarcophagus in a funerary enclosure.

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period of use. The necropolis contained loculus graves, freestanding sarcophagi and pit graves which were placed in tomb complexes or funerary enclosures. The tomb complexes wore different forms of decoration, which could be plaster, or decoration in relief.



Photo: Signe Krag

Fig. 4: Sarcophagi on podiums and on top of loculi

The sarcophagi used at this necropolis were either imported from Greece and Asia Minor or made from local limestone. Some of the imported sarcophagi wore decoration in relief with depictions from Greek Mythology and the most favored themes were scenes from the Trojan War and the Bacchanalia. Also reclining figures in the round topped some of the lids and their faces could sometimes be left unfinished. Many of the sarcophagi were still in quarry state when they were used which suggests that it was not important to the meaning and status of retaining and owning a sarcophagus that it had finished carved decoration.

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The necropolis was heavily reused during the Byzantine period (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD) and during this period many of the funerary enclosures were installed with benches and water basins. Generally the excavation reports from the Roman and Byzantine necropolis lack information and therefore it is impossible to establish which period most of the objects and biological material belong to. But the burial gifts discovered were glass and pottery vessels, jewellery, coins, terracotta lamps, bone clothing pins, beads and bronze crosses.



Fig. 5: Sarcophagi from Asia Minor and Greece, the left sarchaphagus is in quarry state.

The form of the new funerary types are unusual before and during the Roman period and are only found at Tyre and Beirut where both local and Roman traditions are mixed. Multiple burials are seen before the Roman period in Lebanon. But earlier the focus was on the inside of the tomb whereas focus in the Roman period was on the outside of the tomb. Because the funerary types were highly visible they therefore contained messages about civic identity, group membership and economic position. The tombs illustrate the cultural integration into the larger Roman world of this region in the form of stylistic influence, not just from the center but also from other areas of the empire.

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