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Belgian Archaeologists in Tyre (Lebanon): UNESCO Heritage, Phoenician Seals and Ancient Curses

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Abstract

This paper presents research projects currently conducted at the Royal Museums of Art and History (Brussels), centring on the ancient Phoenician and Classical city of Tyre, Lebanon. It first introduces the Belgian participation in the American University of Beirut Museum's excavations in Tyre (campaigns 2012-2013). Secondly, it discusses the present state of research on the scarab seals from the Spanish excavations at Tyre al-Bass, the sector where the Phoenician cremation cemetery is located, and on a newly identified seal workshop to be situated in the region of Tyre.

Keywords: Archaeology, history, Lebanon, 1st millennium BCE, Phoenicians, stamp seals

1. Excavating at a World Heritage Site

International archaeological activities recently came to a halt in Syria and the Belgian archaeological presence in the Levant is presently limited to the participation of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels (RMAH) in the archaeological mission to Tyre headed by Leila Badre, director of the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut (AUB). This participation ensued from three decades of close collaboration

between the two museums. Dr. Badre, who until 2010 excavated in Tell Kazel (Syria) was invited by the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) to excavate a sector in the ancient city of Tyre, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984.

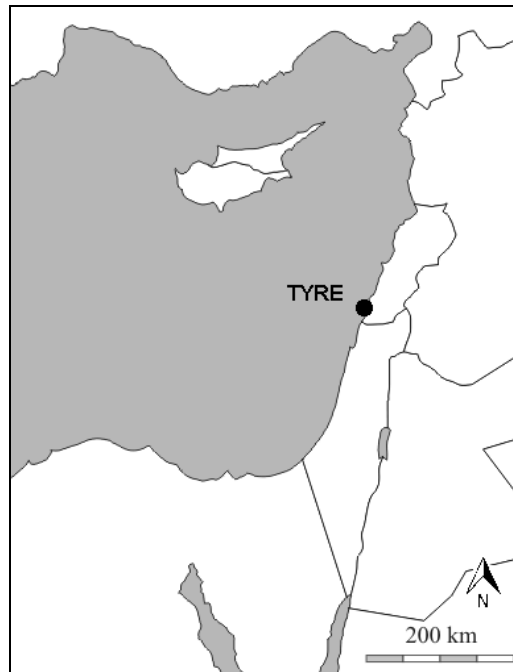


Fig. 1: Map of the eastern Mediterranean with location of Tyre, Lebanon

Whereas Roman and Medieval remains are still visible throughout the modern city, archaeological excavations have reached levels dating back to the 3rd millennium BCE. Even though the few soundings reaching the ancient Phoenician levels (12th-4th centuries BCE) have yet to uncover official buildings dating back to that period, the finds offer insights into the Phoenician culture, daily life and the development of the Phoenician mercantile power. In Antiquity, the city was famed for the production of purple pigment (*purpura* from the Murex sea snail). Tradition tells us it was home to King Hiram who had sent material and craftsmen to Solomon for the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, and from here Tyrian princess Elissar/Dido set out on her journey that would culminate in the foundation of Carthage. Tyre was originally an island near the coast, hence its Phoenician name *Sor*, meaning 'rock'. It remained an island until Alexander the Great laid siege to it and constructed an isthmus or causeway to connect it to the mainland, in 332 BCE (Katzenstein 1973). Over the centuries, the mole silted in and the accumulated sand made Tyre the peninsula it still is today.



Fig. 2: Satellite view of modern Tyre with location of main archaeological sites discussed in this article (by the author after Google Earth®)

Since the 18th century, the archaeological activities have focussed on two main areas: in the east the al-Bass quarter with the necropolis and the hippodrome, and in the west, on the original island, the area of the Crusader cathedral and the Roman baths (Fig. 2). Large-scale excavations started in 1946 under Emir Maurice Chéhab, who uncovered most remains in the two zones, resulting in the creation of vast archaeological parks (Bikai 1992). The AUB Museum excavated an area labelled Sector 7A, located in the southern part of the island site (Fig. 2).

The sector numbering refers to a system implemented by the Lebanese-French team that, since 2008, conducts archaeological and topographical work on the island under the direction of Pierre-Louis Gatier (Gatier 2011). They identified Sector 7 as a late Roman residential quarter (Duvette 2012). Sector 7A abuts Sector 7's north-western part and was excavated by Chéhab in the early 1970s. In uncovering a dig site that was abandoned in 1975 and of which all records were lost during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the AUB Museum 2012 and 2013 campaigns revealed the remains of the first temple identified thus far in the city: a Phoenician sanctuary dating back to the Persian Period, with Hellenistic and Roman phases (Badre 2015)¹.

Whereas Roman levels were the focal point of the first campaign in Sector 7A, the Belgian component of the excavation team moved their activities in 2013 to the western extension of the temple². In addition to a Medieval water well and several Roman cisterns and cooling shafts, this area (Unit 15) revealed the western limits of the temple's precinct. The oldest stratum consists of a sand layer containing Phoenician jars (8th-7th centuries

¹ The excavations were mentioned in the local press, a selection of articles can be found on <http://greatermesopotamia.be/press-2.html> (accessed 1/12/2014).

² The excavation report is being prepared for publication.

BCE) (Fig. 3), yet no traces of occupation or industrial activities. Even though unearthed on a much smaller scale, the finds from these contexts are consistent with the ceramic material from the Phoenician levels excavated west of the Crusader cathedral (Bikai 1978) and in the al-Bass quarter (Aubert 2004; M. E. Aubert, F. J. Núñez, L. Trelliso 2015).



Fig. 3: Sand layer with large fragments of Phoenician jars in Unit 15 during excavation
(© DGA/AUB Museum mission to Tyre, photograph by the author)

After a short hiatus, probably explained by Tyre's dwindling power due to Assyrian expansionism, Phoenicia's integration in the Achaemenid Empire gave a boost to the local economy, reflected in the construction of the sanctuary (6th-early 3rd centuries BCE) and, in Unit 15, of a square cultic water basin and a bin possibly used for sacrificial purposes (Fig. 4). The precinct of the temple of the Persian (Phoenician) Period, was extended in the Hellenistic Period (late 3rd-1st centuries BCE) as demonstrated by a nearly 30 m long wall in Unit 15, representing the western temenos wall that delineated the sacred area. To the western end of the excavation area, a circular pit with middle-sized stones at the bottom contained fragments of Greek wine amphorae and parts of a young cow (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4: View of southern part of Unit 15, with Persian basin and bin, underneath remains of the Hellenistic outer wall of the sanctuary (© DGA/AUB Museum mission to Tyre; photograph by the author)



Fig. 5: Lowest level of Hellenistic pit in western part of Unit 15 during excavation (© DGA/AUB Museum mission to Tyre; photograph by the author)

A Roman 2nd-3rd centuries CE cooling shaft recuperated as a ‘*cachette*’ in the 4th-6th centuries CE yielded a large amount of finds: Late Roman pottery, lamps, glass tableware and 13 folded lead plaques. With the kind permission of the Lebanese Ministry of Culture/DGA and the AUB Museum, the folded lead plaques were temporarily transferred to Brussels, to the RMAH’s metal restauration lab. After careful unfolding, cleaning, and consolidation treatment, they revealed Greek inscriptions. Interactive 2D and 3D recordings facilitated transcribing and translating the texts³: a preliminary study revealed that the tablets (*defixiones tabellae*) contain magical curses pertaining to horse race factions⁴. They are undoubtedly to be associated with the famous hippodrome of Tyre (Kahwagi-Janho 2012), one of the largest of the Roman world and located at 1,3 km distance (cf. Fig. 2).

2. Seals from the largest Iron Age II necropolis in Phoenicia

In the framework of doctoral research on the presence and distribution of Egyptian scarab-shaped seals and their imitations in Syria and Lebanon⁵, the author became involved in the study of scarabs from on-going excavations in Tyre’s al-Bass district (cf. Fig. 2). Since 1997, a Spanish archaeological team from the Pompeu Fabra University of Barcelona, under the direction of Maria Eugenia Aubet, has been uncovering a cemetery (ca. 500 m²) with cremation burials dating between the late 10th and the late 7th century BCE at al-Bass (Aubet & Trelliso Carreño 2015; M. E. Aubet, F. J. Núñez, L. Trelliso 2015 and Aubet 2004). With the number of currently identified cinerary urns exceeding 300, this represents the main urban necropolis of the city and the largest Iron Age II necropolis discovered thus far in Phoenicia. It was established on a beach on the mainland opposite the island city, now more than 3 m underneath the modern urban levels. The cemetery was first noticed in the 1990s, when a large number of Phoenician artefacts suddenly started to appear on the local antiquities market. Excavations started soon afterwards and had already yielded several scarabs (Ward 1991; Gamer Wallert 2004).

About 20% of the burials at al-Bass contain a scarab-shaped seal- amulet, known for its protective value. They are found high up in the cinerary urns; some were placed after the cremation, others have traces of burning, indicating that they accompanied the deceased on the funeral pyre. The scarabs and other Egyptian and egyptianising stamp seals and sealings from excavation campaigns since 2002 are studied by the author (Boschloos 2015a) (Fig. 6). There seems to be a relative equal quantity of scarabs manufactured in the Levant (Canaanite or Phoenician in origin) and seal-amulets imported from Egypt. Whereas some date back to the 2nd millennium, they are mostly contemporary with their contexts, thus reflecting the international character of Tyre’s maritime economy. Moreover, the already noted close affinities between the cemeteries of al-Bass and Akhziv in northern Israel (Aubet 2006, pp. 43-45, 466; Mazar 2009-2010, pp. 227-228) are also apparent in the scarabs from both cemeteries, representing nearly identical parallels (Boschloos 2015a).

³ The images are created using the Portable Light Dome, a multi-light reflectance imaging device developed by the KU Leuven and currently at the RMAH in the framework of the Interuniversity Attraction Poles research network ‘Greater Mesopotamia’. For more information on this device and on the project, see www.greatermesopotamia.be and <http://portablelightdome.wordpress.com>.

⁴ This study was entrusted to classical epigraphist Wilfried Van Rengen (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and is being prepared for publication.

⁵ Vrije Universiteit Brussel 2011-2012, V. Boschloos, ‘Study in the Relations between the ancient Near East and Egypt: The Geochronological Distribution of Egyptian Scarab-shaped Seals in the Northern Levant (Syria and Lebanon) from the Late 3rd Millennium to the Late Iron Age’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, in Dutch).



Fig. 6: Scarabs from the Tyre al-Bass cemetery (Boschloos 2015a: fig. 5.14, 5.16)

3. The ‘Tyrian scarab seal workshop’ (Iron Age II)

While examining the scarabs from al-Bass, a particular type of scarab was noticed. By establishing a catalogue of all scarabs found in the northern Levant and searching for their parallels from the Levant, Egypt, Cyprus and from sites further along the Mediterranean coast, the aforementioned dissertation allowed mapping similar scarabs and, subsequently, postulating a region of origin for this particular type.

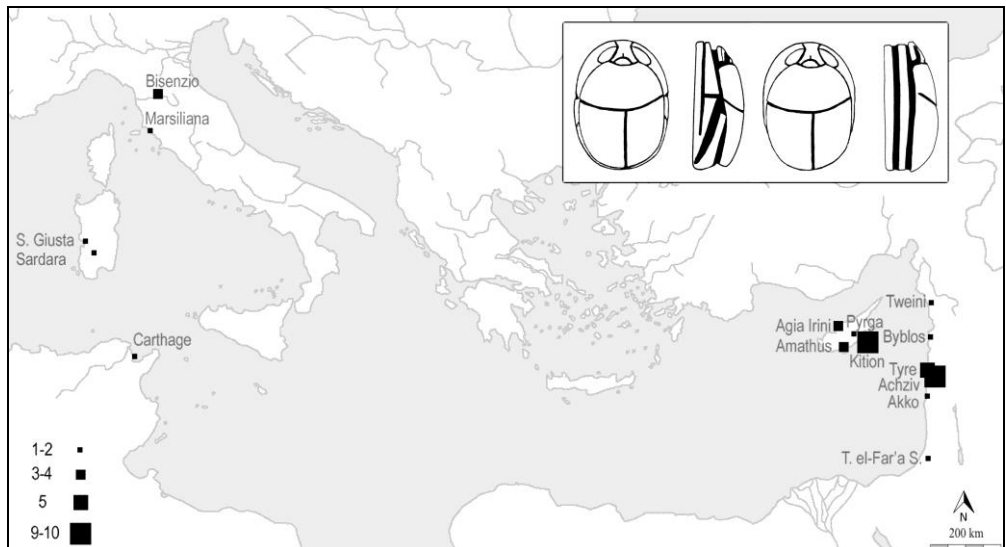


Fig. 7: Scarabs likely produced in the region of Tyre: Distribution throughout the Mediterranean and insert with characteristic typological features (map and drawings by the author)

About 50 scarabs with similar morphological features surfaced in Sardinia, Italy, Tunisia, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon and Israel (Fig. 7). The dates offered for the archaeological contexts and their geographical distribution pattern indicate that they were produced in the Levant, possibly also in Cyprus, during the 9th and 8th centuries (Boschloos 2014; Boschloos forthcoming).

The nature of their style and iconography point to a Phoenician origin, given the mixture of Levantine, Egyptian and egyptianising Phoenician motifs and scenes (Fig. 8). Moreover, the designs are variations on a limited number of themes (winged figures and creatures, floral designs ...), supporting the idea of a single stylistic group.

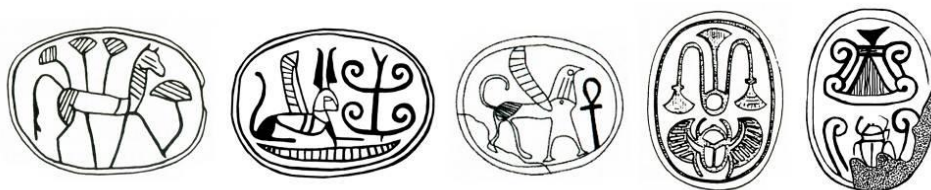


Fig. 8: Selection of base designs on scarabs likely produced in the region of Tyre (not to scale) (Boschloos forthcoming: fig. 1c, 1f, 1i, 2a, 2e)

Large numbers were found in Kition, Tyre and Akhziv and because the earliest stratified examples surfaced in Tyre and Akhziv it was argued that one or more production centres or workshops are likely to have existed in the region. According to the general historical background, Tyre was considered to be one of the principal cities on the Phoenician coast already at the end of the Iron Age I: nearby coastal centres in southern Lebanon and northern Israel, such as Akhziv, belonged to its sphere of influence and Kition was also closely connected to Tyre in the Iron Age II (Katzenstein 1973). Further research aims to determine the sources for certain decorative designs engraved on the scarabs' bases.

4. Final observations

Tyre's long history of archaeological activities offers the means to understand less documented periods of its past, more particularly regarding the Phoenician city hidden underneath the Roman ruins. Since the late Iron Age and Classical remains are the focal point in several archaeological sectors, recognised as World Heritage to be preserved for future generations, it is not always possible to reach the older levels. Still, excavations on the original island and in the al-Bass quarter continue to provide new insights into Phoenician funerary practices, Tyre's early history, economy and society. In spite of their modest dimensions, small finds such as scarab seals offer significant contributions to the reconstruction of Tyre's network of cultural and commercial relations and suggest complex artistic developments, to be situated in a regional context. The close connection with Akhziv and Kition may not just reflect intensive trade relations and cultural affinities, but also raise the question regarding the impact of Tyrian seal cutters on the glyptic traditions of neighbouring regions. In order to further clarify the relations between Tyre on the one hand and Kition and southern Cyprus on the other hand, as reflected by scarabs, an in-depth

study of scarabs from Cyprus is wanting⁶. Another emphasis of future research will be on the ritual and symbolic role of scarabs in mortuary practices in the Phoenician homeland, for which the cremation cemetery of al-Bass presents itself as an excellent case study. While preliminary observations can be made regarding the local production of scarabs in the Phoenician 'kingdom of Tyre' during the Iron Age II, it is expected that new scarab finds from on-going Lebanese, French and Spanish archaeological work in the city will further substantiate Tyre's position in regional and interregional networks.

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⁶ For a preliminary assessment made in 2008, see Boschloos 2015b.

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