

# Byblos



*The obelisks*

beginning of the early Bronze age (about 3000 B.C.) Canaanite Byblos had developed into the most important timber shipping center on the eastern Mediterranean and ties with Egypt were very close. The pharaohs of the Old Kingdom needed the cedar and other wood for ship-building, tomb construction and funerary ritual. In return, Egypt sent gold, alabaster, papyrus rolls, papyrus rope and linen. Thus began a period of prosperity, wealth and intense commercial activity.

Several centuries later Amorite tribes from the desert, overran the coastal region and set fire to Byblos. But once the Amorites had settled in, the city was rebuilt and Egypt again began to send costly gifts to Byblos. Treasures from the royal tombs of Byblos show the great wealth that flooded the city.

Around 1200 B.C. a wave of the so-called "sea Peoples" from the north spread to the eastern Mediterranean, and some settled on the southern coast of Canaan.

Byblos is one of the top contenders for the "oldest continuously inhabited city" award. According to Phoenician tradition it was founded by the god El, and even the Phoenicians considered it a city of great antiquity. Although its beginnings are lost in time, modern scholars say the site of Byblos goes back at least 7,000 years.

The words "Byblos" and "Phoenicia" would not have been recognized by the city's early inhabitants. For several thousand years it was called "Gubla" and late "Gebal", while the term "Canaan" was applied to the coast in general. It was the Greeks, some time after 1200 B.C., who gave us the name "Phoenicia", referring to the coastal area. And they called the city "Byblos" ("papyrus" in Greek), because this commercial center was important in the papyrus trade.

Today Byblos (Jbeil in Arabic), located on the coast 37 kilometers north of Beirut, is a prosperous place with glass-fronted office buildings and crowded streets. But within the old town, medieval Arab and Crusader remains are continuous reminders of the past. Nearby are the extensive excavations that make Byblos one of the most important archaeological sites in the area. It contains layers dating as far back as the Stone Age and extending through the most recent Ottoman era.

## History

About 7,000 years ago a small Neolithic fishing community settled along the shore and several of their monolithic huts with crushed lime stone floors can be seen on the site. Many tools and weapons of this Stone Age period have been found as well.

The Chalcolithic Period (4,000-3,000 B.C.) saw a continuation of the same way of life, but brought with it new burial customs where the deceased were laid in large pottery jars and buried with their early possessions. By the

These seafarers probably contributed their skills to the maritime society we know today as Phoenicia.

About this same time the scribes of Byblos developed an alphabetic phonetic script, the precursor of our modern alphabet. By 800 B.C., it had traveled to Greece, changing forever the way man communicated. The earliest form of the Phoenician alphabet found to date is the inscription on the sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Byblos.

Throughout the first millennium B.C., Byblos continued to benefit from trade in spite of Assyrian and Babylonian encroachments. Then came the Persians who held sway from 550-330 B.C. The remains of a fortress outside the Early Bronze Age city walls from this period, show that Byblos was a strategic part of the Persian defense system in the eastern Mediterranean. After conquest by Alexander the Great, Byblos was rapidly Hellenized and Greek became the language of the local intelligentsia. During this Hellenistic Period (332-64 B.C.), residents of Byblos adopted Greek customs and culture. Both the Greek language and culture persisted throughout the Roman era which was to come. In the first century B.C. the Romans under Pompey took over Byblos and other Phoenician cities, ruling them from 64 B.C. to 395 A.D. In Byblos they built large temples, baths and other public buildings as well as a street bordered by a colonnade that surrounded the city. There are few remains of the Byzantine period (395-637 A.D.) in Byblos, partly because construction was of soft sandstone and generally of poor quality. Byzantine stones were also quarried for later buildings. During this era the city became the seat of a Christian bishopric.

Under Arab rule, beginning 637 A.D., Byblos was generally peaceful but it had declined in importance over the centuries and archaeological evidence from this period is fragmentary.

In 1104 Byblos fell to the Crusaders who came upon the large stones and granite columns of the Roman buildings and used them for their castle and moat. With the departure of the Crusaders, Byblos continued under Mamluk and Ottoman rule as a small fishing town, and its antique remains were gradually covered with dust.



## Excavations

Before Byblos was excavated, the ruins of successive cities had formed a mound about 12 meters high covered with houses and gardens. The ancient site was rediscovered in 1860 by the French writer and savant Ernest Renan, who made a survey of the area. In 1921-1924 Pierre Monter, a French Egyptologist began excavations which confirmed trade relations between Byblos and ancient Egypt. Maurice Dunand began his work in Byblos in 1925 and continued with various campaigns until 1975.

## Byblos Today

A thriving modern town with an ancient heart, Byblos is a mix of sophistication and tradition. The old harbor is sheltered from the sea by a rocky headland. Nearby are the excavated remains of the ancient city, the Crusader castle and church and the old market area. For a real taste of Byblos, stroll through the streets and byways. This part of town is a collection of old walls (some medieval) overlapping properties and intriguing half-ruins. Don't hesitate to explore.

**The Medieval Rampart:** It was first built by the crusaders in the early 12th century strengthened hard at distance by towers, 270 m E-W and 200 m N-S.



Detail of the dagger's sheath



The harbor of Byblos

**The Harbor & Harbor Towers:** The Crusaders built defensive towers on either side of the mouth of the port, and a chain could be raised between the two towers to prevent boats from entering.

**Sayedet al-Najat Church:** (Our Lady of Deliverance) built during the 12th-13th centuries over the remains of an older Byzantine church. Many Roman architectural elements are reused in its structure.

**Saint-John the Baptist Church:** known today as St-John Marcus Church, Construction began in 1115, with additional structures added over time during the 12th-13th centuries, such as the Italianate-style cupola with an open air baptistery (13th century) in the northwest corner. Each one of the church's 3 naves ends with a semi-circular apse. In the 18th century the church was given to the Maronite community by Emir Youssef Chehab. It was severely damaged during the British bombardment of 1840. It was restored in 1947 and the bell tower was added. The architectural style of the church is Roman but reflects the oriental Byzantine influence. In the garden to the west of the church are traces of mosaic paving of an earlier Byzantine church.

**The Mosque of The Sultan Abd el-Majid:** this small Ottoman-era mosque was built in the old historic quarter, and it was renovated by Emir Youssef Chehab in 1783. It has a semi-spherical cupola and an octagonal minaret.

**The Fossils Museum:** it has impressive displays of fossilized fish and other marine life, some millions of years old. Many of them were excavated from the mountains above Byblos near the towns of Haqel, Hjoula & Nammoura. The museum is located in the souk area.

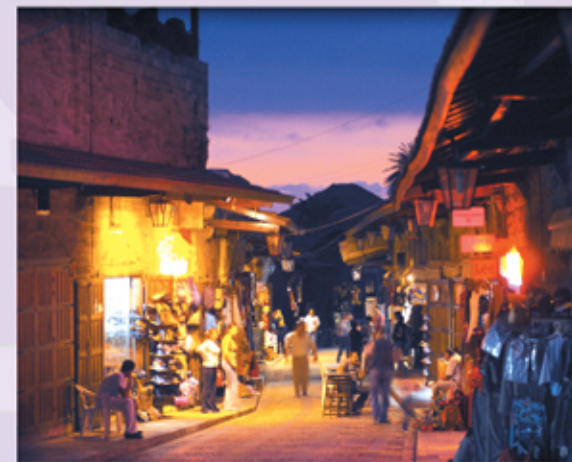
## Visit of the Site of Byblos

1. **The Roman Road:** At the Entrance of Byblos are the remains of the *Cardo Maximus* and the traces of the original roman paving and a series of reconstructed columns from the colonnade that once lined the road.

2. **Remains of a City gate** dating from the third millennium B.C. Located on the left side of the castle, this gate appears as a wide opening between two ancient stone ramparts. Traces of fire are visible, recalling the Amorite invasion about 2150-2000 B.C.

3. **A Primitive Wall** built before 2500 B.C., this is the oldest fortification on the site.

4. **Foundations of the "L" Temple** (so called because of its shape) erected in 2700 B.C. A section of charred stone at the entrance of the sacred court is an evidence that the temple was destroyed by fire, probably at the time of the Amorite invasions 2150-2000 B.C. Terra cotta basins set in a bench of masonry behind the entrance probably held water for ritual ablutions. The large empty area between the "L Temple" and the Temple of Baalat Gebal was occupied by the Sacred Pool.



The old souk



5. **Temple of Obelisks**, originally built on top of the "Temple en L" was moved by archaeologists to its present location. Its scores of small obelisks were used as votive offerings. Altogether over 1306 offerings have been uncovered including human figurines of bronze covered with gold leaf.

6. **"Ayn el-Malik" area**, that was once the Spring, can be seen in a large cistern constructed of irregular stone. This was the main source of water for Byblos where Isis had met the queen's maidservants in the Isis and Osiris myth.

7. **Enclosure and Houses** of the pre-urban period (about 3200-3000 B.C.)

8. **Foundations of 3 Houses**: The lower one is from the Chalcolithic, the upper one from the pre-urban period (second half of the forth millennium B.C.) A little further south is a third house in whose rooms can be seen seven stone bases which held the wooden pillars used for the superstructure.

9. **Bronze Age Residence**: Remains of a large early Bronze Age Residence (third millennium B.C.) in whose rooms can be seen three rows of five stone pillar bases, each of which held wooden pillars used for the superstructure.

10. **Early Bronze Age Building Foundations** (third millennium B.C.)

11. **House Foundations of the Amorite conquest period** (2150-2000 B.C.)

12. -15. **Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlements** (fifth and fourth millennia B.C.): Remains of several monocellular huts with crushed limestone floors can be seen in the area between the Early Bronze Age Residence (9) and the seashore. Archaeologists have found cultural installations or temples in two structures: the first one, with an apsidal shape, is located at the northern edge of this area (14) and the second one (15) at the southern edge.

16. **The Amorite Quarry** is a large excavation in the rock behind the Baalat Gebal temple.

17. **Early Bronze Age House** located near the quarry. The thick walls of its seaside façade are notable for their fine construction.

18. **Remains of the Temple of Baalat Gebal** (2700 B.C.), dedicated to the "Lady of Byblos", the goddess who was to preside over the city for over two millennia. Constructed when Byblos had close ties with Egypt, this large and important temple was rebuilt a number of times, remaining in use until the Roman period when it was replaced by a Roman style structure.

19. **Reconstructed Roman Theater**. The theater, which has only five tiers remaining, was built about 218 A.D. It was moved from its original site between the City Gate (2) and the two superim-



Site plan of Byblos

1. The Roman Road
2. Remains of a City Gate
3. A Primitive Wall
4. Foundations of the "L" Temple
5. Temple of Obelisks
6. "Ayn el-Malik" Area
7. Enclosure and Houses
8. Foundations of three Houses
9. Bronze Age Residence
10. Early Bronze Age Building Foundations
11. House Foundations of the Amorite
- 12-15. Neolithic and Chalcolithic Settlements
16. The Amorite Quarry

17. Early Bronze Age House
18. Remains of the Temple of Baalat Gebal
19. Reconstructed Roman Theater
- 20-28. Royal Necropolis
29. Residential Quarter
30. Roman Colonnade
- 31-32. Ramparts, Glacis and City Walls
33. Roman Nymphaeum
34. the Crusader Castle
35. Persian Castle



posed temples (4 and 5), to its present location near the sea. The black pebbles in the center mark the place of a mosaic which has been preserved in the National Museum.

**20-28. Royal Necropolis:** It dates to the 2nd millennium B.C. and contains nine underground tombs of the Byblos kings. The most important is that king Ahiram, whose sarcophagus bears one of the earliest inscriptions of the Phoenician alphabet. This sarcophagus is one of the masterpieces found in the National Museum in Beirut.

**29. Residential Quarter:** Dating back to the Bronze Age.

**30. Roman Colonnade:** These six standing columns lined a north-south street (300 A.D.) that led to the temple of "Lady of Byblos" or Baalat- Gebal.

**31-32. Ramparts, Glacis and City Walls** of the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C. Located inside the modern wall on the right side of the Castle entrance, those structures show successive stages of construction and restoration. The intended wall belongs to the fortifications of the 3rd millennium, while the terraced slopes or glacis made of large blocks, goes back to Hyskos period (1725-1580 B.C.).

**33. Roman Nymphaeum:** Located to the left of the Castle entrance, this monument was decorated with a niche filled with statues and enlivened by fountains. The roads coming into the city from the north, converged on the fine pavement that stretched in front of the nymphaeum.

**34. The Crusader Castle:** The site was originally occupied by a Fatimid fortification. In the beginning of the 12th century, the Crusaders built a strong fortress, re-using Roman stonework and cutting new stones to match the old. The castle consisted of



*Baptistry of the Crusader church of St. John*

a central keep, courtyard and enclosure. With four towers defending the corners and a fifth in the middle of the north wall to defend the entrance. The whole was originally surrounded by a moat. In Mamluk and Ottoman times the castle was re-used and some parts of it were restored.

**35. Persian Castle:** the complex dates from the Persian period (555-333 B.C.). It is believed to be a castle because of its large masonry walls and the military and defensive aspects of its architecture. The remains are located outside the Early Bronze Age city walls, and today visitors can see foundations of the castle walls and square shaped towers. The fact that a fortress was constructed here during this period shows that Byblos was a strategic part of the Persian defense system in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A quick and entertaining introduction to Lebanon's past can be found at the Wax Museum near the Castle. The wax figures illustrate scenes from the history and rural life of the country. There is a modest entrance fee. With its many restaurants, snack bars, souvenir shops and hotels, Byblos is well prepared to welcome tourists. For more details refer to the Ministry of Tourism office at Byblos. Tel: 09-540325

**Byblos Festival** features among the most famous yearly festivals in Lebanon. It is organized in summer season. World-wide renowned artists have performed on its stage. Transportation is assured. For more information visit the website : [www.byblosfestival.com](http://www.byblosfestival.com)

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