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Byblos in the Hellenistic period

Jean-Baptiste Yon

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BYBLOS

A Legacy Unearthed

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES (THE NETHERLANDS)
& MINISTRY OF CULTURE/DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF ANTIQUITIES (LEBANON)**



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BYBLOS

A Legacy Unearthed

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES (THE NETHERLANDS)
& **MINISTRY OF CULTURE/DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF ANTIQUITIES (LEBANON)**

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Contents

Preface	9
Sarkis El-Khoury and Wim Weijland	
Foreword	11
Tania Zaven	
PART I: EXPLORING BYBLOS	
1. Byblos Excavations, Yesterday and Today	17
Julien Chanteau and Tania Zaven	
2. The Archive of Maurice Dunand: An Itinerary from Geneva to Byblos	27
Patrick M. Michel	
3. Quarrying the Sea	31
Jeanine Abdul Massih	
4. Byblos World Heritage Site: A Refuge for Floral Diversity	37
Moustapha Itani, Nivine Nasralla, Maryam Sedaghatpour, Michele Citton, Tania Zaven, Salma Talhouk	
5. Rescue Excavations and Their Contributions to the History of Byblos	41
Tania Zaven and Georges Doumet	
PART II: THE ORIGINS OF A HARBOUR CITY	
6. The Neolithic of Byblos	49
Corine Yazbeck	
7. Byblos during the Chalcolithic Period	53
Kamal Badreshany	
8. The Chalcolithic Jar Burials from Byblos	59
Gassia Artin	
9. Byblos during the Early Bronze Age	67
Michel de Vreeze	
10. The First Defensive Systems at Byblos	75
Ziad Jalbout	

11. Tell Fadous-Kfarabida: A Regional Perspective on Byblos	81
Hermann Genz	
12. Byblos and the Early Egyptian State	89
Karin Sowada	
13. The Connections between Byblos and Mesopotamia during the Early Bronze Age as Seen from the Ebla Archives	97
Maria Giovanna Biga	

PART III: THE FOCAL POINT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

14. Byblos during the Middle Bronze Age	103
Yasmine Makaroun	
15. The Bronze Age Harbour of Byblos	113
Martine Francis-Allouche	
16. The Relations between Byblos and Egypt during the Middle Bronze Age	123
Hanan Charaf	
17. Byblos: Egypt's Gateway to the Levant and beyond during the Bronze Age	129
Alexander Ahrens	
18. The Tale of Sinuhe: A Glimpse of Byblos from Middle Kingdom Egypt	135
Richard Bruce Parkinson	
19. Byblos and the Mediterranean in the Middle Bronze Age I as Seen from the Mari Archives	139
Nele Ziegler	
20. A New Middle Bronze Age Necropolis on the Byblos Acropolis	145
Julien Chanteau and Tania Zaven	
21. The Early and Middle Bronze Age Deposits at Byblos	153
Michel de Vreeze	
22. The Metal Figurines from Byblos	159
Camilla Saler and Gianluca Miniaci	
23. Weapons, Metals and Identities in Middle Bronze Age I Byblos	163
Ziad el Morr	
24. Faience Animals from the Obelisk Temple	169
Layla Abi Zeid	
25. Byblos and the Seals of the Green Jasper Workshop	173
Vanessa Boschloos	
26. The Scarabs from Byblos	177
Vanessa Boschloos	
27. The Byblos Script	181
Ben Haring	

28. The History of Byblos during the Late Bronze Age	185
Marwan Kilani	
29. Byblos and its Architecture during the Late Bronze Age	189
Marwan Kilani	
30. Relations between Sidon and Byblos during the Bronze Ages	195
Claude Doumet-Serhal	
PART IV: PROSPERING IN THE SHADOWS	
31. Byblos: The Transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age	207
Marc Abou-Abdallah	
32. Byblos during the Iron Age	213
Eric Gubel	
33. The History of the Phoenician Inscriptions in Byblos	217
Hélène Sader	
34. Byblos during the Persian Period	221
Josette Elayi	
35. Byblos during the Hellenistic period	229
Jean-Baptiste Yon	
36. The Colonnaded Street of Byblos: A Roman Symbol of Monumentality	235
Rola A. Saadi	
37. Haghia Byblos: Gods and Heroes between Rain, Waves and Waterfalls	243
Zeina Fani Alpi	
38. Byblos and the Tree of the Gods, the Cedar	249
Anne-Sophie Dalix	
39. The Myth of Adonis and Astarte in Byblos and its Hinterland during the Roman Period	251
Wissam Khalil	
40. A Roman and Byzantine Necropolis in Byblos (BYB 418)	255
Tania Zaven and Georges Doumet, with contributions by Mahmoud Mardini, Abdallah Alaeddine, Karl Azzam, Zeina Fani, and Georges Abou Diwan	
41. Byblos during the Byzantine Period	263
Frédéric Alpi	
42. Ġbayl in Medieval Times	267
Hassan el-Akra	
43. The Fortifications of Medieval Ġbayl/Byblos	271
Anis Chaayat	
Bibliography	277

BYBLOS DURING THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

Jean-Baptiste Yon

Byblos, modern Jbeil, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited sites in the Near East and, like Damascus, Aleppo, Tyre or Beirut, it has kept its name through the ages. Although it was little known in the Hellenistic period (336-31 BC), the site was still inhabited and not forgotten, keeping its double name, Semitic Gebal and Greek Byblos. However, the continuous occupation is only sparsely reflected in the sources. The city was little more than a name, in the period between Alexander the Great, his successors in the late 4th century BC, and Pompey who beheaded the local tyrant around 64-63 BC. While no significant abandonment layer seems to appear in the archaeological records, some traces, such as rare inscriptions, coinage in the name of the city and sparse archaeological discoveries, serve as clear evidence of this occupation (Fig. 35.1-2).

Similarly, the continuity of the cults from the Bronze Age, the Phoenician period to Roman imperial times has often been underlined, leading one to believe in their preservation during the Hellenistic period, but material evidence is somewhat lacking: it is not possible to specify to whom the temples that are commonly recognized on the site are dedicated. The existing plans are based mainly on modern reconstructions, and it would be misleading to come to conclusions about the Hellenistic period, based exclusively on later evidence.

The archaeology of Hellenistic Byblos

Despite a few remains found here and there, it is still difficult to form a precise picture of the topography of Hellenistic Byblos. Obviously, Hellenistic remains were not among matters of concern for the first excavators, who were much more interested in earlier – and more glorious – periods. It does not mean that these remains were totally neglected, and they do figure in the reports published by Montet, Dunand and Lauffray, allowing a map of Hellenistic Byblos to be created (Salles 2003, fig. 6).

The most striking aspect seems to be the continuity of the Bronze Age period sanctuaries into Roman times, which would indicate that religious life was still vibrant in the Hellenistic city. Among the possible sanctuaries are the so-called *Bâtiment I*, some parts of which may be Hellenistic, *Bâtiment II* (which could be the Baalat Gebal Temple, the great goddess of Byblos) and a large, paved area between them. Other remains of this period include a Hellenistic district to the south of *Bâtiment II*, a settlement area near the later Roman nymphaeum (see Chapter 36), part of a ‘glacis’, a number of houses (Fig. 35.4) and several tombs.

The excavations have revealed a substantial amount of Hellenistic material (ceramics, lamps, figurines etc.). Rediscovered sculptures show the presence in



Figure 35.1: Gold coin with Alexander the Great, minted in Byblos. Luynes.1613 (43-23-54) © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.



Figure 35.2: Silver coin with Alexander the Great, minted in Byblos. Y-44 (5-41-36) © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

the city of the Hellenistic 'high culture' of the time, for instance, in the masculine head of a prominent individual, maybe a priest (c.100 BC; Dunand 1937, pl. XLII; 1939, 34-35). Other discoveries show the continuity of local customs, for instance, a throne of Astarte (Dunand 1950, pl. CLII). Amphora stamps are proof of links with the outside world, but there are not enough to prove that it was an important point of trade. Likewise, the ships and murex on the coinage could reflect the reality of the period and thriving trade, or more probably only a glorious past.

Languages

As can be seen on the coinage, the local language, Phoenician, was still in use, at least on official documents. Another piece of evidence is a small terracotta throne with a bilingual inscription to Astarte, also known as the Lady of Byblos, probably dated to the 1st century BC, or a little later (Ἀστάρτη / B'LT GBL). But Phoenician texts were very rare and in the process of disappearing, with official use very quickly limited to coin legends. No Phoenician name is attested in the Greek inscriptions of the Hellenistic period and there is only one example for



Figure 35.3: Location of a Hellenistic area north of the Roman nymphaeum. Photograph by author.



Figure 35.4: Bronze Age tombs reused as Hellenistic cellars to the south-east of the ancient city. Photograph by Julien Chanteau.

the Roman period (one Gerostratos, Γηρόστρατος, of unknown date), which amounts to less than 1% of the corpus. If a Phoenician inscription found at Byblos in the 1920s (Briquel-Chatonnet 1991, 4-6) is indeed of Hellenistic date, one must add the names 'Abdeschmun ('BDŠMN) and 'S'. The latter, of uncertain pronunciation, is perhaps a personal name formed on the name of the goddess Isis, which corresponds well with Egyptian influences, very present in Phoenicia since the Bronze age.

The cults of Byblos

This last example draws attention to the deep Egyptian coloration of the local cults (Bonnet 2015, 187), but also to the evolution of those cults, from the Iron Age into the Roman period. One probable theory links the prestige of Isis at Byblos with the earlier cult of the Ba'alat, the 'Lady' of Gubal/Byblos. Her masculine counterpart, Adonis (a Greek name originating in the Semitic 'DN 'Lord'), could have been, at the same time, more or less assimilated to other suffering gods (Osiris) or Greek heroes with a tragic destiny (Aliquot 2004, 213; Bonnet 2015, 171-88). However, even if there is no Hellenistic documentation from the city for his cult, his popularity in Roman times, which is frequently associated with Byblos, must have its roots in the preceding Hellenistic period. According to Strabo (XVI, 2, 18) – who wrote at the very beginning of the Roman period – the city was 'consecrated to Adonis'.

Indeed, a remarkable development was the introduction of new images on the coins of Byblos. Isis Pharia, depicted standing on reed boat, was originally an Egyptian goddess, but she was also Isis, as interpreted in Alexandria by the Greeks (Aliquot 2004, 214; 2009, 177-78). Likewise, Byblos is perhaps the place where a particular image of the 'sailing Isis' (*euploia*) was created. The god Harpocrates was another 'Egyptian' figure on the coinage with a clear Hellenistic origin.

One such phenomenon of iconographic stability, between the Hellenistic and the Roman periods at least, was the figure of Six-winged Kronos/El, prominent on the coinage of the 2nd century BC (Sawaya 1998). His iconography is mirrored by a later description by Philo of Byblos (as transmitted by Eusebius, *Preparatio Evangelica* I, 10) giving the name of the god, assimilating a Semitic supreme god, El, with some sort of supreme Greek deity (the father of Zeus), Kronos.

The regional context

If it had been dependent on external evidence, Byblos would be virtually unknown, except for short mentions in literary sources. The last local king was Enylos (in Greek, Ἐνυλος; Elayi and Elayi 1993a). His name is the equivalent of Phoenician 'Aynel ('YN'L), on the coins (Rouvier 1901; Hoover 2010, nos. 138-40). This king did not appear after the siege of Tyre in 332 (see Chapter 34),

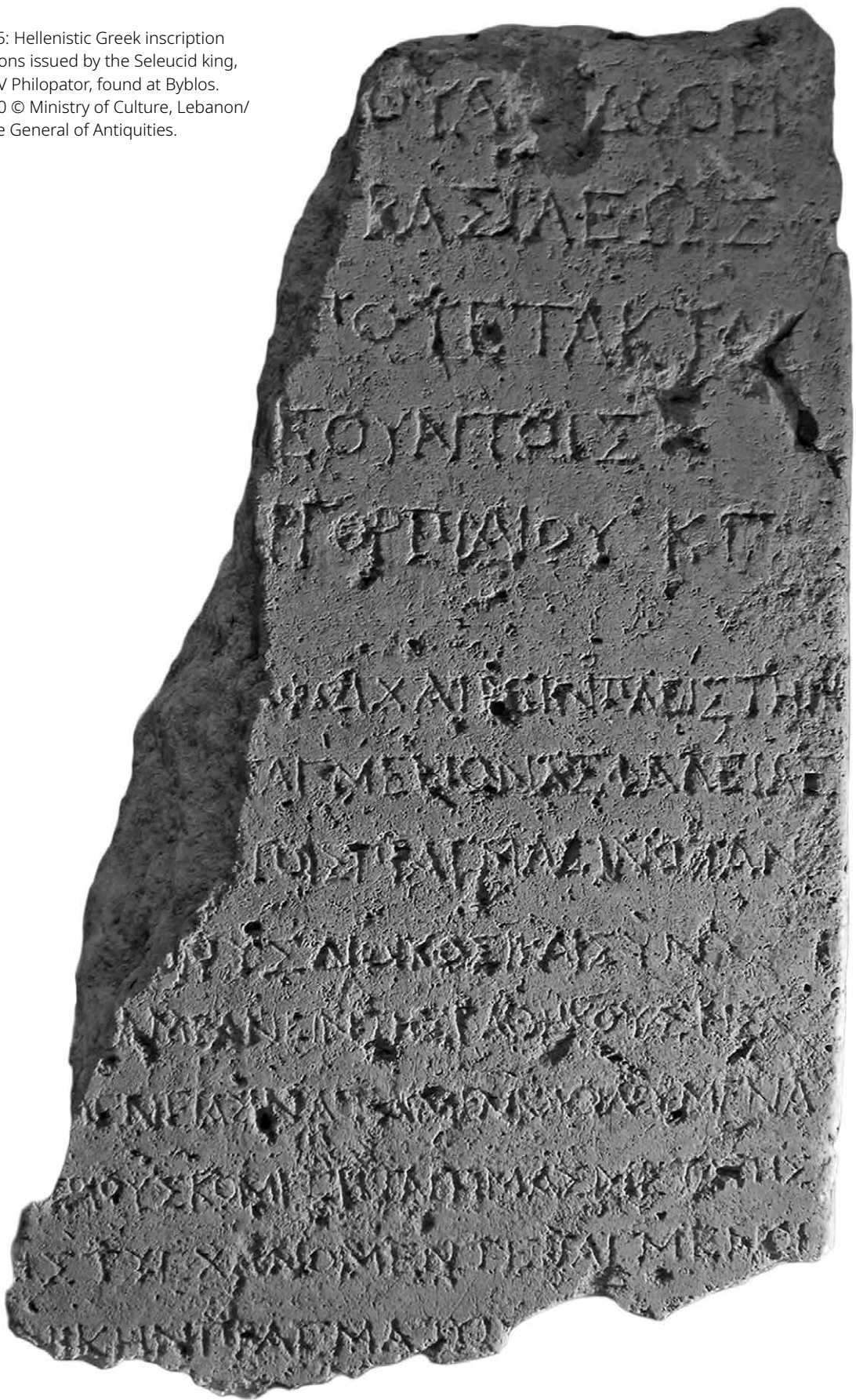
nor did any other. The city was still in the foreground a few years later, at the time of the Wars of the Successors of Alexander the Great (323-301 BC), when it was one of the shipyards of Antigonos (c. 316 BC), which presupposes infrastructure, in addition to the proximity of the mountains, which could have provided wood for the ships (Diodorus 19, 58). Afterwards (from 301 BC), the city was under Ptolemaic domination until the end of the 3rd century BC. This fact has to be seen in the context of strong links with Egypt from at least the Bronze Age. Egyptian cults left a deep imprint on the religious life of Byblos, as can be deduced from the Hellenistic and Roman documentation.

After the victory of Antiochus III (200 BC) against the Ptolemaic forces, Byblos became part of the Seleucid empire but, except for the coinage and an occasional inscription, remains of this period are few. It is only in the first decades of the Seleucid period that clear proof of an organized community becomes visible. An inscription dating to September 178 BC discovered during the 1930s excavations allows Byblos a secure position on the map of the Seleucid Near East (Fig. 35.5). Like sanctuaries in other cities of the Seleucid province of Syria and Phoenicia, it was subject to regulations issued by the Seleucid king, Seleucus IV Philopator (187-175 BC), and by the administration of the satrapy (province) (Yon 2015).

A few years later, under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC), a civic 'pseudo-autonomous' coinage (by the city, but with the portrait of the king), put in the foreground a self-definition of Byblos as 'Saint' in Phoenician (LGBL QDŠT 'Of Gubal [Byblos] the saint'; Houghton, Lorber and Hoover 2008, 79-81). Admittedly Byblos coins, rather rare, circulated only in a fairly small area. Later from 102 BC, the head of the king was replaced by the bust of Tyche, with a Phoenician legend, but a date in Greek letters (Seyrig 1954, 73), at a time when the Seleucid kings had lost all influence, outside a narrow area.

The Seleucid power faded over time, which explains why the last reference concerning the Hellenistic period in Byblos is found in the Geography of Strabo (XVI, 2, 18), in which the city is described as struggling with brigands and with a local tyrant, before being liberated around 64-63 BC by the Roman armies of general Pompey (106-48 BC), who beheaded the tyrant. Available evidence, especially post-Antiochus IV (after 164 BC) coinage, suggests that the city did not lose all of its importance during this period. Later documentation shows that, at its core, the continuity was linked to the religious role of the city, which is reflected in authors of the Roman period (Plutarch concerning Isis and Osiris, Lucian's, *On the Syrian goddess* or the translation of a Phoenician history, attributed to a mythical author 'Sanchuniaton', by Philo of Byblos).

Figure 35.5: Hellenistic Greek inscription of regulations issued by the Seleucid king, Seleucus IV Philopator, found at Byblos. DGA 12570 © Ministry of Culture, Lebanon/ Directorate General of Antiquities.



Byblians abroad

It is only by turning to external epigraphic documentation that one could even mention the name of one of the city's inhabitants. The Aegean Island of Delos has preserved evidence of vibrant communities of Phoenicians and other people from the Levant and surrounding regions. For Byblos, it includes gifts to the sanctuaries of Delos made by the Byblians as a group, or by an athlete, Timokrates, who won in boxing, in the 'young' category, at the Apollonia. Finally, the epitaph of one Dionysios, son of Hermesandros, from Byblos, has been found in the necropolis of Delos (references in Yon 2015). In all cases, the onomastics is purely Hellenic, but the sample is very small. Generally speaking, during the Hellenistic period, personal names of Byblians were predominantly of Greek origin, as they were later in Roman times.

Conclusion

In the context of the later Hellenistic period and the decline of the Seleucids, small local powers, such as Byblos, were faced with numerous opponents, brigands

and other dangerous neighbours. Earlier, the Seleucids, eager to find local support, had made concessions to the cities, reigniting rivalries between close neighbours (Capdetrey 2007, 220), which reinforced local identities. Clearly, the religious past of Byblos supported its survival as a city, at a time when it had, seemingly, lost any political or commercial role, except locally. This religious specialization, marked by the city itself as an element of self-definition ('Of Byblos the Saint', in Phoenician, then in Greek during the Roman period *Ἱεράς Βύβλου*), was undoubtedly the reason for its success. All later evidence concerning the city (Plutarch, Lucian, and obviously Philo of Byblos, who highlighted the traditions of the city from which he came) was concerned, almost exclusively, with this religious life.

Thus, the city had managed to survive, but as archaeological remains or external testimonies show, it was not particularly prominent. Nevertheless, several documents from Byblos itself help to explain how the city evolved, to become, in Roman times, a city well present on the map of the religious life of the Near East.

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